

The Flâneur as Foreigner: Ethnicity, Sexuality and Power  
in Twentieth Century New York Writing

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## Abstract

The intention of this thesis is to examine the production and function of twentieth century Manhattan's various marginal communities and underworlds as mediated through the New York walking narrative. The literary flâneur's specialist reading of the cityplace offers an important ground level entry point into these communities, revealing significant tension within the multicultural, multi-racial city.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first provides a historical and theoretical foundation by examining the origins of the literary flâneur. Before turning to the contemporary material, this chapter offers a photo-fit of the Parisian flâneur and demonstrates that although the New York flâneur is an almost unrecognisable distortion of his or her nineteenth century European counterpart, the two share key characteristics. The chapter then charts the transposition of the flâneur from Europe to America and examines how important literary precursors to the twentieth century New York walking narrative, such as works by Baudelaire, Benjamin, Poe and Whitman, influence and inform the texts studied in the subsequent chapters. Chapter two is a study of the work of Jack Kerouac and James Baldwin. This chapter reveals the racial tension between Manhattan's white bohemia and black ghetto by examining the flâneur's crossing of racial boundaries within the cityplace. Chapter three focuses on the work of Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara and examines the tension between 'straight' and 'queer' space by charting the gay flâneur's path through the city. Chapter four examines the blurring of flânerie and vagrancy in the work of Herbert Huncke and David Wojnarowicz by considering the perspective of two homeless writers hustling on the streets of New York. Chapter five is a study of gentrification in Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American*

*Psycho*. These two texts allow for gentrification to be viewed from opposing perspectives, through the eyes of two radically different urban wanderers.

The thesis as a whole examines the precarious position of Manhattan's 'outsiders' and exposes the manner in which all forms of transgressive activity, including flânerie, are at risk of being stifled or eradicated by surveillance, policing and gentrification. The flâneur's own position within the cityplace is critically reassessed with regards to his or her potential to either perpetuate or destroy marginal communities via his or her advertising of 'otherness'.

For my parents –

Dennis Carlaw 1947 – 2006  
&  
Irene Carlaw



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## Introduction

Many Icelandic people once believed that their country was populated by supernatural beings who they referred to as *huldufólk*. This term can be translated into English as ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ people. Folklore tells us that these beings were able to make themselves, their homes and the livestock which they raised invisible to the human eye. They were considered extremely dangerous and were known to populate villages alongside lava fields and other unusual natural formations which characterise Iceland’s peculiar landscape. With the introduction of electricity to Iceland the legend of the *huldufólk* was driven from the cities and villages as the foreboding shadows which the beings inhabited became filled with light.

New York City has its own ‘hidden people’. They are not supernatural entities, yet, they too exist in the shadows of the metropolis and are both excluded and feared. This thesis is a critical examination of Manhattan’s ‘*huldufólk*’ through the eyes of the twentieth century literary *flâneur*, utilizing key works by Jack Kerouac, James Baldwin, Frank O’Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke, David Wojnarowicz, Sarah Schulman and Bret Easton Ellis. I intend to demonstrate the manner in which each of these writers illuminates individuals and micro-communities that exist in the shadow of American capitalism.

Manhattan’s urban density and exaggerated vertical topography provide the ultimate location for this study. The city’s ‘hidden people’ live both literally and metaphorically in the penumbra of Midtown’s skyscraper monuments to economic success. Many individuals are driven into the city’s shadows on account of their racial and/or ‘sexual’ outsidership. Others become ‘hidden’ because they willingly or unwillingly do not comply with the expectations of a triumphalist society that is intolerant of failure.

The intention of this thesis is to examine the production and function of Manhattan's various marginal communities and underworlds, as mediated through the New York walking narrative. The literary flâneur's specialist reading of the cityplace offers an important ground level entry point into these communities, allowing for an excavation of marginal space and transgressive activity within the metropolis. In particular, the following study exposes the manner in which the city's dominant classes and excluded others live in mutual fear of one another. I intend to demonstrate how the flâneur's field studies of Manhattan's 'hidden people' challenge the hegemonically produced identities of 'dangerous', 'deviant' and 'parasitic' subcultures. The flâneur's wanderings help us to understand the fragile predicament of the city's outcasts and allows for them to be reconsidered as prey rather than predator. I question whether the most terrifying threat at street level comes not from the shadow populations but from the dominant classes themselves.

This thesis analyses the manner in which capitalist America repeatedly feeds upon its excluded others. The hegemonic order depicts its marginal communities as both minatory and surplus to requirements while simultaneously exploiting 'otherness' as a form of entertainment and financial resource. At street level, the literary flâneur witnesses this phenomenon in the form of gentrification, offering a first hand account of the destruction of communities. 'Otherness' is rapidly homogenised or pushed further outwards.

I intend to examine the flâneur's own actions as a form of counter-hegemonic practice. However, I also intend to interrogate his allegiances with the communities which he surveys. Are his intentions benevolent, or is he too feeding off the city's excluded 'others'? By the end of this thesis I intend to ascertain whether the flâneur

forms an (albeit unintentional) avant-garde to gentrification via his advertising of alternate lifestyles.

The study itself draws upon the classical model of the nineteenth century Parisian flâneur transposed into the definitive New World metropolis. In chapter one, a photofit of the Parisian flâneur is developed in order to distinguish the correspondences and differences between the Old and New World flâneurs. While, it is clear that the twentieth century New York flâneur is an almost unrecognisable distortion of his nineteenth century counterpart, I intend to argue that the New York flâneur retains a set of key characteristics. These include an approach to urban walking based upon immediate circumambient sensory stimulus, a fascination with the city's outcasts or *nostalgie de la boue* and ultimately a desire to decipher the complex and coded nature of the street level cityplace. Not all of the individuals examined in this study are consciously indulging in the act of flânerie in a *classical* sense. However, each individual takes up a specific position in the urban field as both the watcher and/or watched. Despite significant variations between the nineteenth century European and twentieth century American urban observer, this thesis further demonstrates how key studies of the Parisian flâneur by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin relate directly to post-war Manhattan. I intend to forge important links between key nineteenth century French and American texts (namely work by Whitman and Poe) in order to chart the flâneur's move to the New World.

Alongside a critical reassessment of the characteristics and function of the New World flâneur, this thesis also seeks to examine the flâneur's relationship with the city's excluded 'others'. In chapter two, a study of the work of Jack Kerouac and James Baldwin reveals a strong racial tension between New York's white bohemia and the black ghetto. The focus of this particular chapter is de facto racial segregation

and the flâneur's crossing of racial boundaries within the cityplace. Chapter three uses the work of Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara to examine the position of the homosexual flâneur in New York City. This chapter re-evaluates both Ginsberg and O'Hara's projections of a sexualised cityspace. Tension between 'straight' and 'queer' space is revealed in charting the gay flâneur's path through the city. Chapter four draws upon the work and memoirs of Herbert Huncke and David Wojnarowicz, unearthing Manhattan's criminal underworlds, and will examine vagrancy, addiction and transgressive urban behaviour. This chapter examines the moment when the flâneur becomes bound to the community which he surveys, considering the perspective of two homeless writers hustling on the streets of New York. Chapter five is a study of gentrification in Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. Primarily, this final chapter considers the pressure placed on marginal communities by the wealthy dominant classes. The work of Schulman and Ellis allows gentrification to be viewed from opposing perspectives, through the eyes of two radically different urban wanderers.

Common threads running throughout the fabric of this thesis include issues of gender, sexuality, performance and surveillance. Each of these themes are present to varying degrees in all of the works studied. However, in specific texts certain themes are muted whilst others are clearly amplified. Chapter two addresses the Beat performance of a ghetto lifestyle and the act of 'passing'. Chapter three addresses various performances of sexuality. Chapter four considers the realities of homelessness and addiction in relation to the flâneur's adoption of an assumed identity. Chapter five examines performance, with regards to both the commodification of bohemianism and the detection of transgressive behaviour. This

thesis reconsiders street level Manhattan as a theatrical stage where the flâneur is simultaneously positioned as both performer and audience.

The structure of this study gives pattern and logic to the apparent metamorphosis of the New York flâneur and New York bohemia(s) over the course of half a century, charting a distinct progression from the willed social transgression of the post-war Beat Generation to junkie homelessness in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies and culminating in the commodification of bohemianism in the nineteen eighties. The subsequent chapters are ordered to reveal the manner in which New York's economic fortunes have a significant bearing upon the flâneur's physical and critical positioning within the cityplace. The work of Kerouac, Ginsberg and O'Hara offer accounts of varying flirtations with Manhattan's bohemia(s) and excluded others during the post war boom. Due to their specific positioning within the cityplace, they share a partial kinship with the nineteenth century Parisian flâneur. Baudelaire studied the rag pickers whilst holding the privilege of being able to retreat to safer and more affluent areas of the capital when desired. The white, middle class flâneur of the post-war era has a similar opportunity to excavate Manhattan's minatorial geography whilst being only blocks away from safe, affluent areas of a then flourishing city. Kerouac's failsafe was a return to his mother's house in Ozone Park, a conservative borough of Queens, should slumming in Harlem or the East Village prove too much for him. The wanderings of Baldwin's characters in *Another Country* offer a contrasting experience of unwilling social exclusion. Baldwin scrutinises the free movement of white bohemians within the ghetto in comparison to the heavily restricted movement of black Harlemites outside the ghetto.

New York's continued growth during the fifties and sixties was met by a period of economic uncertainty in the nineteen seventies. Samuel M. Ehrenhalt writes that:

After substantial growth in the late 1960's, the economy plunged into freefall in the early and mid-1970's, with the onset of the economic crisis of that period – aggravated by the 1973-4 oil embargo and the recession of 1973-75. From the end of 1969 through 1976, the only direction was down, with more than 600,000 jobs lost, a sixth of the city's employment base... During this period, many observers seemed to give up on New York, having decided that the only course for the future was to manage the decline, or at best, maintain stability.<sup>1</sup>

New York's economic downturn was reflected upon the streets. The city experienced significant increases in homelessness and violent crime. Manhattan's mean streets became notorious; films such as Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) drew upon the danger, corruption and vice extant at street level. The changing nature of the city had a significant bearing upon its bohemian spaces, and those residing there. Areas of the East Village fell into significant disrepair, merging with the slums of the Lower East Side. The Lower East Side itself gained further notoriety, as dilapidated housing became the locus of shooting galleries and squats. For the bohemians themselves, the post war Beat dalliances with narcotics and 'willed' homelessness had in many cases developed into full-blown addiction and destitution. This perhaps accounts for the reason that the most striking literary examples of observational urban wandering from this period are memoirs rather than fictional works. The writer is no longer a casual observer or part-

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel M. Ehrenhalt, "Economic and demographic change: the case of New York City," *Monthly Labor Review* 116.2 (1993): 41.



time participant in underworld activity. The work of both Huncke and Wojnarowicz recalls a period when they were permanently destitute upon the streets of Manhattan. In nineteenth century Paris, the eye of the flâneur was drawn by characters such as the ragpicker and the prostitute. Huncke and Wojnarowicz pen their accounts of New York in the seventies and early eighties from the perspective of these marginal figures. Their position on the street allows them to assume a position similar to that of the flâneur, yet, as chapter four demonstrates, surveying and understanding the street is a method of survival rather than a pleasurable activity.

As the seventies drew to a close, a New York which was deemed to be beyond salvation took an unexpected economic upturn. Ehrenhalt comments that the mid seventies marked the beginning of a period of “new and unheralded vitality... There were 11 years of remarkable, vigorous growth. Between 1976 and 1987, the city added more than 400,000 jobs.”<sup>2</sup> The shift in the city’s job base was highly significant. Ehrenhalt goes on to state that before the end of the eighties “the number of managerial, professional and technical workers nationally exceeded the number of blue collar workers by 2 million.”<sup>3</sup> With regards to New York, between 1983-90, workers in these fields accounted for “about 70 percent of the net growth in the number of employed New York City residents.”<sup>4</sup> The increase of higher earning professionals in the cityplace ushered in significant changes. Manhattan entered a period of newfound decadence; the decade saw an influx of designer apartments, upscale restaurants, boutiques and nightclubs.

For New York’s bohémias, the new yuppie crowd posed a significant threat. ‘Loft living,’ as romanticised by the Beats during the fifties, became a desirable option for young professionals moving into the city. Gentrification in areas such as

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<sup>2</sup> Ehrenhalt 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ehrenhalt 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ehrenhalt 45.

Greenwich Village and The Lower East Side was a brutal and rapid phenomenon. Rental costs increased significantly, forcing the original tenants to vacate their apartments. Living spaces were then stripped out and luxuriously renovated for their new, wealthy tenants. The commodification of bohemianism and the rapacious nature of the dominant professional class led to significant tension. Graffiti such as “Yuppies Go Home” and “Kill a Yuppie,” became common in the Village. This tension is addressed from opposing perspectives in Schulman’s *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Ellis’s *American Psycho*. New York’s economic upturn and the resultant clean up of the city streets, produces two types of urban wanderer. *Girls, Visions and Everything*’s Lila Futursky is a melancholic, helpless observer of the onslaught of gentrification. She wanders the streets, nostalgic for a pre-gentrified bohemia. Meanwhile, *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman is an opportunist, as much stalker as flâneur. An embodiment of venture capitalism, he takes all that he desires through money and aggression. Pairing Futursky and Bateman allows for the predator / prey dichotomy in relation to nineteen eighties New York to be discussed explicitly.

Each of the texts examined in this thesis offer case studies in variations of the flâneur. In *The City*, Robert E. Park states that New York is a “mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate.”<sup>5</sup> The flâneur remains an important literary device, as the wandering observer allows for a pathway to be forged both through and between these worlds. The unique pathway charted through Manhattan’s block mosaic of streets offers ground level reconnaissance of a specific moment or moments within the cityplace. The recognition and recording of personal sensory experience is the most basic function of the flâneur. The leisurely pace of the urban amble, ranging between three and five miles per hour, is an ideal choice of movement for gathering

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<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie. *The City* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984) 40.

such data. Details of locational and sensory experience (primarily visual, auditory and olfactory) provide the basis for the recall of the flâneurian walk.

The weakness of the flâneur as a literary device is that it physically binds urban experience to the solitary individual. The circumambient urban locale can be described only through the frontal vision of the flâneur. That which exists outside the flâneur's frontal vision must be omitted, resulting in a fragmented and therefore partial/specialized reading of the cityplace. That which is included or excluded from the flâneur's gaze is indicative of his or her socio-political positioning within the city, alongside further individual desires or drives experienced during the act of walking.

The variations of flâneur selected for this study were chosen specifically on account of their position in relation to New York City's dominant power structures. Kerouac's urban wanderer prompts questions regarding willed outsidership and the subsequent allegiances formed with marginalized others. Chapter two charts the hipster's path into Manhattan's black communities and readdresses accusations once directed toward the Parisian flâneur regarding the parasitic nature of his act. This chapter transposes the same debate from nineteenth century Paris to the New World setting of twentieth century Harlem. This in turn raises debates regarding the long history of slumming in New York City. Kerouac's thinly veiled autobiographical account of the ghetto through the eyes of a wandering narrator is heavily scrutinised. Relationships between the white hipster and African American trigger a discussion regarding the manner in which issues such as colonialism, 'passing' and white racist perceptions of black sexuality intersect in both public and semi-public spaces within the ghetto.

Baldwin's implementation of both black and white urban wanderers in *Another Country* provides a provocative counterpoint to Kerouac's work. Vivaldo is

Baldwin's parody of the white hipster in Harlem. He is drawn uptown by the lure of the 'exotic'. As with Kerouac, desirable sensory stimulus comes in the form of both jazz and black sexuality. Conversely, Rufus is a black Harlemit who whose nocturnal wanderings allow him to witness the white invasion of the ghetto. The novel addresses a number of issues, most importantly the vertical movement between uptown and downtown Manhattan and therefore the crossing of boundaries between black and white. Baldwin also tackles the manner in which the individual has the potential to become an outsider after walking only a few blocks.

Although the issue of race is amplified in this chapter, further related issues regarding sexuality cannot be overlooked. For example, it is still necessary to examine phenomena such as queer bashing and prostitution, both of which are examined by Kerouac and Baldwin. In Kerouac's work we encounter the heterosexual male's indulgence in these phenomena, whilst Baldwin reveals the fear experienced by both the homosexual and the prostitute at street level.

Chapter three develops the theme of sexuality, examining the poetry of both Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara. Both of these poets found the utmost pleasure walking the streets of New York City and both were gay. As with Kerouac and Baldwin, these two writers came from very different backgrounds and moved in somewhat dissimilar circles in 1950's Manhattan. As a consequence of this Ginsberg tends to focus on the streets of the gritty Lower East Side and Greenwich Village, whereas O'Hara concentrates on the Midtown surroundings of his place of work. The nineteenth century Parisian wanderer was thought of as being 'invisible'. His urban studies were conducted stealthily, drawing as little attention to himself as possible. This chapter critically reassesses the New World flâneur as visible and therefore vulnerable. Drawing upon and developing discussions of 'passing' and queer bashing

from the previous chapter, the study of Ginsberg and O'Hara addresses sexuality, movement and threat in the cityplace. Whereas the previous chapter considered the racial implications of being a white flâneur in a black ghetto, or a black flâneur exploring white bohemia, the intention of this chapter is to examine the freedoms and restrictions of movement imposed upon the homosexual flâneur in New York. This study questions how these limitations vary zonally, contrasting Midtown, Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side.

In poems such as Ginsberg's "Mugging," the city poses a genuine physical threat to the flâneur. Whilst walking Ginsberg is attacked, dragged into a disused lot, beaten and robbed by a gang of teenagers. His identity as a middle-aged, weakening gay man designate him as a potential victim at street level and the gang take full advantage of this. Alongside examining the flâneur's vulnerability, methods of counterattack are also critically interrogated. With regards to "Mugging," Ginsberg sexualises the attack, dispelling horror in turn for personal pleasure. This chapter argues that both Ginsberg and O'Hara utilize the act of flânerie as a means of queering 'straight' space. With O'Hara, the element of threat is present yet muted. O'Hara depicts the city as an almost utopic sexual playground, as he cruises blissfully through Manhattan. It is the manner in which O'Hara sexualises and in turn tames the city streets which is of key interest. This chapter also critically aligns the act of flânerie with gay cruising, considering the blurred boundaries between the two. The erotic subtext which links flâneur, voyeur, cruiser and stalker is excavated.

The homosexual flâneur's gaze provides an important rereading of street level New York. An examination of Ginsberg and O'Hara's specialised reading of Manhattan's streets reveals the multi-dimensional nature of the cityplace. Hidden elements of the gay underworld including the act of cruising itself, alongside various

uses of body language to conceal or telegraph sexuality, are unearthed. The function of this chapter is to address the coexistence of straight and queer dimensions within the cityplace.

Chapter four examines poverty and crime. The Beat theme is perpetuated by Herbert Huncke who is paired with David Wojnarowicz, a gay artist and writer who spent a number of years destitute on the streets of 1970s New York. The work of both men discusses the esoteric criminal world which remains hidden in the most part from the eyes of the public. This chapter expands upon earlier discussions of New York as a multi dimensional space. In its description, the criminal dimension of the city revealed by Huncke and Wojnarowicz borders upon the supernatural. Both authors describe the eerie transformation which occurs on the streets as night falls. A new 'shadow population' emerges, replacing the daytime population. In many cases the professions of the 'shadow population' require the cover of the nocturnal city: hustlers, prostitutes, pimps, pushers, muggers and various other opportunists such as Huncke himself. A key theme discussed by both authors is that of surveillance. The work of Huncke and Wojnarowicz facilitates a study of the various 'watchers' positioned within the urban field. The locus of this study is Times Square. In terms of transgressive behaviour a number of patterns are revealed: the hustler watches for both the john and the police. His intention is to display his trade, yet conceal himself from the authorities. The john, like the hustler, must display his intentions for being on the street and must also simultaneously conceal himself from the authorities. Meanwhile, the police must assume a suitable position on the street in order to survey potential criminal activity, but also conceal themselves in order to apprehend the criminal. The complex interplay which is performed at street level allows the flâneur to be reconsidered as both observer and observed. This study of surfaces and

appearances further considers the importance of light within the nocturnal cityplace. Whilst darkness conceals and light reveals, Huncke and Wojnarowicz also detail the manner in which neon light distorts the appearance of the 'shadow population'. The putrid green and demonic red of Times Square's illuminated advertising hoardings intensify the supernatural qualities projected upon New York's homeless underclass. A by-product of American capitalism, the shadow population's relationship with the consumer world which surrounds them and essentially illuminates their lives is scrutinized.

A further intention of this chapter is to examine Huncke and Wojnarowicz as additional variations on the flâneur model. In the act of observational wandering, both writers adhere to the key characteristics of the flâneur, other than they have no home to go to, and nothing else to do but watch. Is it possible to become a flâneur, involuntarily? Walter Benjamin describes how the Parisian flâneur made the streets of the city his home.<sup>6</sup> Yet the Parisian always had somewhere to withdraw to, a retreat from the crowd. The phantasmagoria unfolds perpetually in front of Huncke and Wojnarowicz's eyes, whether they like it or not. This chapter charts the flâneur's shift from possessing a nostalgia for the gutter to actually living in the gutter.

The flâneur's relationship with the automobile is further considered in relation to Wojnarowicz's statement: "Driving around the city, it didn't take long to realise that if you didn't have a vehicle, a machine of speed, you owned poverty...."<sup>7</sup> As a walker, Wojnarowicz feels exposed upon the street, particularly from passing cars with out of town plates. This feeds into a broader discussion regarding the dominant classes' relationship with Manhattan's marginalized 'others' in the following chapter.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Review, 1968) 45.

<sup>7</sup> David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 30-1.

The central focus of chapter five is the gentrification of bohemian spaces in nineteen eighties New York. This chapter utilises two opposing protagonists. Patrick Bateman of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* and Lila Futuransky of Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything*, in order to explore the socio-political ramifications of the dominant classes' invasion of Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side. Issues regarding the commodification of bohemianism, which were present yet muted in previous chapters, are amplified here. Chapter two argues that urban wanderers such as Kerouac albeit unintentionally spearheaded the gentrification of areas such as Harlem via their exploration and subsequent romanticisation of the ghetto. Chapter five readdresses this argument in relation to the most grotesque variation of the opportunistic wanderer. In terms of money and power, he can be seen as sharing more of a kinship with the Parisian flâneur than any of the other protagonists. Correspondences between Baudelaire's "Let's Beat up the Poor!" and *American Psycho* will be examined. However, Bateman is arguably a hideous mutation of the flâneur, a stalker rather than passive observer who has the intention of forcibly taking all that he desires. Examining Bateman as an embodiment of the rapacious nature of corporate America by no means absolves the slumming Beats of a multitude of sins. It does, however, readdress where the true blame for the Disneyfication of marginal spaces and most significantly the eviction of the original tenants truly lies. The Beats' search for 'kicks' in the ghetto is rendered a somewhat benign activity when compared to the wrecking ball which venture capitalists bring to communities purely for their own personal financial gain.

This chapter reassesses Bateman as a form of 'collector,' based upon the manner in which he takes from the cityplace. His wealth and social standing mean that little is beyond his grasp. Rather than being a passive observer, Bateman partakes in a



'physical violation' of the city. His collection of urban trophies range from consumer products to the human head which he keeps in his refrigerator. Trophies are either purchased or forcibly seized. Bateman represents the spreading fungus of gentrification which Futuransky dreads.

Issues regarding surveillance and identity are also key here. Bateman's actions go unnoticed due to his appearance as a respectable businessman. However, Lila dresses like a nineteen fifties Beat, whilst the police in *Girls Visions and Everything* pose as drug dealers or gay men cruising. Drawing upon Judith Butler's work on performance, this chapter analyses the various staged identities adopted at street level. In a city where the authorities have embedded themselves among society's outcasts and psychotics dress as bland businessmen, potential threat is almost invisible within the public sphere.

By varying the flâneur's position and role within the cityplace, this thesis seeks to examine and interrogate the experience of each of these urban wanderers, revealing the complex interplay of gender, sexuality, race and power which occurs at street level in Manhattan.

## Chapter 1

## Walking in the New World:

## The History and Practice of Flânerie in Europe and America

The primary intention of the following chapter is to establish a photo fit of the nineteenth century flâneur. The thesis as a whole examines varying types of wanderer in twentieth century New York literature during the post 1945 period. It is first necessary to establish a set of key characteristics for the traditional flâneur, before determining how the New York wanderer relates to his or her nineteenth century Parisian counterpart. It is possible that in labelling New York's strolling observers as 'flâneurs', the traditional definition of the term is stretched beyond its limitations. This chapter seeks to resolve this potential tension by examining the intricacies of traditional flânerie and then paring down the term to its essential elements. These elements will be recognisable in the actions and movements of the New York wanderers examined in the subsequent chapters.

The texts examined in this thesis were selected due to the manner in which they showcase varying configurations of the urban wanderer. Each text examines the existence and movement of New York's decentred identities at street level from the perspective of a solitary urban walker. Kerouac and Baldwin's work was selected primarily on account of its treatment of race; Ginsberg and O'Hara, sexuality; Huncke and Wojnarowicz, homelessness and the criminal underworld; and Schulman and Ellis, gentrification and threat. Other New York writers such as Paul Auster and Alfred Kazin<sup>1</sup> employ the walker as an exploratory device in their work, however, they do not engage with Manhattan's community of outsiders in the same manner. When reexamined in relation to the figure of the flâneur, the texts selected for scrutiny

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* and Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* both feature urban wanderers.

in this thesis offer important insights into the role of social transgression and exclusion in postwar New York.

The origins of the flâneur as a literary device are rather uncertain. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term referring to “a loungeur or saunterer, an idle man about town,”<sup>2</sup> entered the *English* language during the nineteenth century. Possibly the earliest recorded usage of the term could be found in the August 1854 edition of *Harper’s Magazine*: “Did you ever fail to waste at least two hours of every sunshiny day, in the long ago time when you played the *flâneur*, in the metropolitan city, with looking at shop-windows.”<sup>3</sup>

Examples of literary devices resembling what we would now identify as flânerie, can be found at a much earlier date. In *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, Dana Brand argues convincingly that “the flâneur is as English a phenomenon as he is a French one...”<sup>4</sup> Brand outlines that a literary device resembling flânerie can be found in the ‘survey’ or ‘urban panorama’ books which depicted sixteenth century London. He notes that these books had a mutual “encyclopedic intention, bourgeois urbanism that celebrates the city’s magnificence and vitality, and a tendency to divide the city into separate spaces so as to give the reader the sense of looking at a coherent map or model of the metropolis.”<sup>5</sup> Brand states that these ‘static’ urban panoramas were complimented by the publication of further genres which focused upon other aspects of city life. For example, in the “coney catching” books, which depicted criminal activity in the sixteenth century capital, tales of pickpockets and fraudsters brought the streets to life, whilst alerting the reader to the dangers of walking in the city. Similarly,

<sup>2</sup> “Flâneur,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1999 ed.

<sup>3</sup> *Harper’s Magazine*, Aug 1854 411-2 qtd. in “Flâneur,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1999 ed.

<sup>4</sup> Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Brand 17.

“Theophrastian character books,” where the author attempted to categorize and subsequently describe the individuals that walked the city streets. for Brand form the “origins of the flâneur’s conception of the urban crowd, if not the origins of the flâneur himself”.<sup>6</sup>

Although the makings of the flâneur are clearly evident in sixteenth century English literature, the device is by no means an identifiable creative force in the same manner in which it is in nineteenth century French literature. Walter Benjamin asserts that the flâneur originated in 1830s Paris, rooted in the increasingly popular *romans-feuilletons* of the period. Although critics alongside Brand, such as Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson,<sup>7</sup> contest Benjamin’s assertion, it is indisputable that the mid 1800s marked the beginning of what is now termed as ‘high flânerie’.

### **Baudelaire’s Paris**

Baudelaire’s Paris was a city of desire that aroused the appetite of the artist, but left him hungry. The streets of the capital, according to Baudelaire, offered the potential for the “intersection” of “countless relationships,”<sup>8</sup> yet few of these relationships are seen to be fulfilling. The city can be seen as being in bipolar opposition to Eden. It is a space of *ennui*, where desires are heightened but rarely fulfilled. Behind the colour and vibrancy of the Parisian lifestyle there is an emptiness, which is characterized by the lonely wanderings of the flâneur.

Two key works in terms of nineteenth century Parisian flânerie are Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) and the poetic work, *Paris Spleen* (1869). *The Painter of Modern Life* serves as an introduction to the flâneur’s

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<sup>6</sup> Brand 21.

<sup>7</sup> Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson, “The Flâneur on and off the Streets of Paris,” *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994) 22–43.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Preface to La Presse, 1862,” *Paris Spleen, The Parisian Prowler: Le Spleen de Paris. Petites Pomes en Prose*, trans. Edward K. Kaplan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 129.

methodology, whilst the later *Paris Spleen* employs the flâneur as its main narrative device, allowing us to follow the wanderer through the streets and witness for ourselves exactly what he *does*. A combined reading of these two important texts enables us to piece together a detailed character study of the Baudelairean flâneur. More significantly, we can pinpoint those traits which remain inherent in the twentieth century *New York* flâneur, and those which appear to have been muted or discarded.

Firstly, we recognize that Baudelaire's flâneur was a man suffocated by the indoors. Baudelaire writes, "He who easily espouses crowds knows feverish delights, of which the selfish will be eternally deprived, locked up in a chest, and the lazy, confined like a mollusc."<sup>9</sup> Here Baudelaire derogates men who shut themselves away, whether emotionally or physically. The indoors, or private space, is depicted as a prison or shell-like environment which shelters the individual from the "ineffable orgy"<sup>10</sup> of sensory experience taking place outdoors on the street. The lure of the street draws the Baudelairean flâneur from the comparative dullness of his home into the energetic boulevards, arcades and cafés of nineteenth century Paris.

It appears then that if the flâneur were to 'take a walk' to a New World city, New York would be the perfect choice. It is arguable that twentieth century Manhattan in particular could be considered as more of an 'outdoors city,' more of an "ineffable orgy" of sensory experience than nineteenth century Paris ever was. In his essay "New York, New York," Douglas Tallack draws reference to the American Impressionist Childe Hassam. After training in Paris, Hassam returned to America in 1889 to begin work on his *New York Windows* series. Tallack points out that:

Whereas Hassam's Impressionist-type rapid brush strokes, interest in the casual and ephemeral, and theories of light and open space,

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<sup>9</sup> Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* 21.

<sup>10</sup> Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* 21.

succeeded in capturing Paris and Boston, the same techniques missed the intensity of New York...In an intriguing painting from 1918 entitled *Tanagra: The Builders, New York* we can see the vertical grid of a steel-frame skyscraper through the window, with another tall building behind. However, the city is kept at a distance by Hassam's concentration upon interior elaboration...[Similarly,] in the *Windows* series the city can only be seen in blurred outline through net curtains.<sup>11</sup>

Hassam's failure to capture the city in artistic terms lies directly in his focus upon the interior. When watching a film set in Manhattan, whether it be *Midnight Cowboy* or *Taxi Driver*, we are clearly not interested in interiors and we certainly do not want the film's protagonists to stay indoors for too long. The rooms in which Joe Buck, Ratzo Rizzo or Travis Bickle stay provide only momentary respite from the surging energy of the street. And like the nineteenth century Baudelairean flâneur, it is this energy which we want to experience, it is this energy which excites us. We do not only want to see the street, we want to be on the street and feel the fear of mixing with the crowd.

In terms of nineteenth century Paris, Baudelaire cautions that "not everyone is capable of taking a bath of multitude: enjoying crowds is an art."<sup>12</sup> This in turn introduces us to the second key characteristic of the Baudelairean flâneur: his aloofness. Mid-nineteenth century illustrations of the flâneur in Louis Huart's *Physiologie du Flâneur* (1841) capture the character's detached air. In each of the illustrations the flâneur is depicted alone, bedecked in top hat and tails with an accompanying cane. Yet it is his stance which proves to be most interesting. Almost

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Tallack, "New York, New York," *3Cities Project*, 16 Nov. 2000, Universities of Nottingham and Birmingham, 22 July 2004 <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/tallack2.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* 21.

without exception, the flâneur poses haughtily with what appears the utmost disdain for the viewer. In one illustration he is seen smoking a cigar and although his gaze is drawn elsewhere, his elbow points directly toward us keeping us at a distance. In another illustration he peers into a pair of opera glasses and yet again his body language suggests that we may view him, admire him, yet not approach him.<sup>13</sup>

In essence, the illustrations demonstrate the manner in which the flâneur is interested in the act of watching (rather than fraternizing with) the crowd. The gentlemen depicted in Huart's *Physiologie du Flâneur* were members of the Parisian aristocracy. With no need to work these men had almost unlimited time to explore the streets of their city, making notes as they progressed. Their disregard for time is epitomized by Walter Benjamin's depiction of the flâneur taking a turtle for a walk in *Charles Baudelaire a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.<sup>14</sup>

Yet for Baudelaire, the *true* flâneur is not made so as a consequence of his fortune, breeding or fashion sense. In a section of *Le Spleen de Paris* entitled "Crowds," Baudelaire proposes that only a chosen few, namely *poets*, can partake in and understand the act of flânerie, he "whom in his cradle a fairy breathed a craving for disguises and masks, hatred of home and a passion for travelling."<sup>15</sup> Baudelaire believes that a poet is any man who realizes that he is apart from the crowd even when immersed in it. Consequently, the Baudelairean flâneur's aloofness amounts to more than a mere pretence: it is a stance that allows him to mingle with the crowds on the streets of Paris whilst simultaneously providing him with the required distance to provide a critique of nineteenth century street life. However, unlike the gentlemen depicted in *Physiologie du Flâneur*, Baudelaire outlines that, if possible, the flâneur's

<sup>13</sup> Louis M. Huart, *Physiologie du Flâneur* (Paris: Lavigne, 1841) 54, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* 21.

aloofness should not be openly displayed. In section three of *The Painter of Modern Life*, entitled “An Artist, Man of the World and Child,” Baudelaire writes:

The crowd is his [the flâneur's] domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world... The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes.<sup>16</sup>

Baudelaire suggests that regardless of the necessary *critical* distance which the flâneur must place between himself and the crowd, he must nevertheless assimilate physically with those which he observes. He must mask his identity by dressing and acting as those around him do. The flâneur can thus roam the streets incognito, his ghost-like invisibility enabling him to see without being seen. This is a trait of the perfect idler. With regards to the New York flâneur, visibility and invisibility remains a key theme. However, as revealed in subsequent chapters, it is highly apparent that in a multi-racial metropolis such as New York City the flâneur struggles to match his Baudelairean counterpart in terms of remaining incognito. We discover that the twentieth century New York flâneur is far more exposed. In certain cases, such as Rufus, the black protagonist in Baldwin's *Another Country*, the individual cannot mask his (racial) difference when exploring the streets of the predominantly white Greenwich Village. In other cases, the protagonist chooses to promenade rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P.E. Charvet (London: Viking, 1972) 398.



hide his or her difference, such as Lila, the lesbian flâneur in Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything*. As we discover, the New York flâneur's lack of invisibility often has violent repercussions, such as in Allen Ginsberg's autobiographical poem "Mugging". Yet despite, or perhaps rather on account of, the New York flâneur's visibility and consequent vulnerability, a Baudelairean fascination with "disguises and masks" remains. For the twentieth century wanderer in Manhattan, transmission and/or concealment of identity via codes of dress is of the utmost importance.

The final major characteristic of the Baudelairean flâneur, which we as of yet have neglected to discuss is his desire to travel. In *The Sphinx in the City*, Elizabeth Wilson points out that, "As the Parisian middle class grew rich, the classic bohemia went into decline. The growth of industry impoverished the artisan and petty bourgeois families from which many of the clerks and students of bohemian circles had come, and by the late 1840's the flâneur had replaced the bohemian of an earlier period."<sup>17</sup> Yet the bohemian and flâneurian desire to travel remain closely linked.

The bohemian's desire to travel is evident throughout the course of history. Byron, deemed by many to be one of the first bohemian icons, had a love affair with Greece, in Flaubert's mind, conversely, the word happiness became interchangeable with the word Orient,<sup>18</sup> whilst for Picasso it was Africa which proved most captivating. Although these far flung destinations are geographically and culturally diverse they each hold one thing in common: the lure of the exotic.

Escape through travel offered the bohemian a release from the rigours and demands of bourgeois society. As Elizabeth Wilson states, "Byron loved Greece, a land where he could be himself, fulfilling the homosexual side of his nature in a manner impossible in Regency London... Flaubert set off for Egypt with his friend

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992) 55.

<sup>18</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin, 2002) 74.

Maxine du Camp in the hope of exotic sexual adventures. During his visit he spent the night with the famous courtesan Kuchun Hanem. He may have also slept with men."<sup>19</sup> For the bohemian, travel to distant lands was a voyage of discovery. Sexual discovery was, undoubtedly, high on the agenda, as we see with Byron and Flaubert. Far from the cold, well-mannered streets of London or Paris, sultry climes were thought of as a catalyst for wild abandonment. Here the bohemian could indulge in the 'primitive' sexuality which these lands were said to embody.

Of course, alongside sexual experience, travel to exotic destinations also provided inspiration for writers such as Byron and Flaubert, reflected in, amongst other works, Byron's *The Isles of Greece* (1819) and Flaubert's *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1833). At the very least, travel provided the opportunity for the bohemian-artist to recount his experiences abroad to his own native audience, most of whom would never leave the country in which they were born. In many instances, we notice the way in which travel provokes a fundamental change within the artist. Rather than remaining as an outsider, or critic, he slowly begins to assimilate with the inhabitants of the land to which he has travelled. Flaubert himself developed a strong kinship with the Middle East and Middle Eastern traditions to the extent that he "wore a large white Nubian shirt, trimmed with red pompoms, and shaved his head, except for one lock at the occiput...he acquired a local name, Abu-Chaunab...[and] because of his dark skin tone, his beard and moustache and his command of the language, he was often mistaken for a native."<sup>20</sup> Flaubert admitted that he felt more accepted, more at home, in the Middle East than he ever had in his native France, even though he was, and always would be, a white Frenchman.

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000) 140.

<sup>20</sup> Botton 94.

We learn a number of things from Byron and Flaubert's travels at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Firstly, we begin to understand how the lure of the exotic draws artists to foreign lands. In the early eighteenth century, countries such as Greece or Egypt would be considered by most Londoners or Parisians as unreachable as another planet. Nevertheless, the educated classes would have an albeit sensationalised idea of what these countries were like, based upon the travel literature of the time. The attraction of travel was, as it still is in many ways today, to discover to what extent the reality of the foreign corresponded with that of the myth. After all, the vague vision of Greece or Egypt the individual can conjure up whilst sitting in an armchair in a London or Paris townhouse is inestimably different from the experience of touring the Greek Islands, or wandering through the back streets of Cairo. Secondly, we learn how both men travelled in pursuit of sensual pleasure. This, it must be understood, is not merely limited to heterosexual or indeed homosexual encounters with the natives. Exotic sensual pleasures could be as varied as the smell of the spice markets, or the taste of foods never sampled before. Byron and Flaubert travelled to liberate their senses. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we discover how travel has a profound effect upon the bohemian artist to the extent that he begins to appropriate the styles and customs of the country to which he has travelled.

Yet unlike the bohemian before him, the flâneur discovered that he did not necessarily have to travel thousands of miles as both Byron and Flaubert did. Wandering in large multi-cultural cities, such as Paris, provided the flâneur with a momentary glimpse of the exotic. Alexandre Privat d'Anglemont, a close friend of Baudelaire's mistress, Jeanne Duval, loved Paris for its "ethnic diversity – the whole world in one city."<sup>21</sup> With no fixed abode, Privat lived a nomadic existence, "camping

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 142.

out' in a number of cafes around Paris, or in the Hotel Corneille, a "tower of Babel of students from all countries speaking all languages."<sup>22</sup> Of Creole extraction himself, Privat mixed extensively with the city's immigrants, not only in the hotel in which he often stayed, but on the streets themselves. He was well known in the Latin quarter, but also chose to frequent the Arab and African cafes which were beginning to appear throughout the city during the 1830's. Yet rather than taking an interest in immigrants alone, Privat appeared to be fascinated by the exoticism of all urban outsiders. It was his custom to wander the Parisian streets at night, studying the poorest classes. In his most famous work, *Paris Anecdote* (1854), he recounted tales of some of the peculiar characters that he had encountered during his walks, including a cat killer and a dealer in the tongues of mice and rats.

Privat was said to be the son of a natural aristocrat and a woman of mixed race. He dressed like an English gentleman, but had a shock of frizzy red-brown hair. His appearance alone set him apart from the average Parisian. It is perhaps for this reason alone that Privat felt most at home existing between worlds. On the one hand, he spent the allowance which was sent to him by his family in Guadeloupe on fine tailoring. On the other, he mixed with penniless outcasts in the most squalid areas of the city. The fact that he was thought of as a 'mulatto' would have prevented him from being truly accepted in high society, whilst his aristocratic background meant that he could never be considered as one of the poor. He was himself an outsider, and in this light, he thought his identification with other outsiders as nothing more than natural.

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<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 142.

The flâneur's urban wanderings can be seen in a similar light to the international wanderings of the bohemian, to the extent that both were conducting a form of search. Keith Tester writes in his introduction to *The Flâneur*:

...flânerie, after Baudelaire, can be understood as the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise unsatisfied existence; replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the bohemian such as Byron or Flaubert set sail for foreign lands in a quest to 'complete' his identity, the flâneur steps out onto the streets. This is understandable to the extent that within his own living quarters, the flâneur feels sapped of energy, trapped or even dead. He is, so to speak, not at home in his own abode. Consequently, he wanders the streets in search of an environment which not only energizes him, but makes him feel at home. This characteristic is highly applicable to the twentieth century New York flâneur. Like Privat, the protagonists examined in the subsequent chapters are all to a certain extent outsiders. For example, Kerouac wanders into predominantly black populated areas due to the fact that he finds white America unwelcoming, with little to offer him. Conversely, in *Girls Vision and Everything*, Lila wanders the streets in search of what Sally Munt terms a "Sapphic paradise,"<sup>24</sup> an enclave of the city where lesbians are accepted rather than shunned.

### **Nineteenth Century New York Flâneurs**

Before turning to the contemporary material, I wish to examine the nineteenth century precursors to twentieth century New York flânerie. E.A. Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," alongside Walt Whitman's "Calamus" poems form vital links between

<sup>23</sup> Keith Tester, ed., *The Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994) 7.

<sup>24</sup> Sally Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur," *Mapping Desires: The Geography of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995) 114.

the Parisian and New York flâneur. The “Man of the Crowd” offers one of the earliest examples of the employment of the flâneur device in American literature. Baudelaire translated “The Man of the Crowd,” and according to Benjamin, “saw fit to equate...Poe’s narrator...with the flâneur.”<sup>25</sup> Benjamin begged to differ, stating that Poe’s “man of the crowd is no flâneur. In him, composure has given way to manic behaviour.”<sup>26</sup> There are two potential flâneurs in “The Man of the Crowd,” the first is the narrator and the second, the old man whom the narrator pursues. The story commences with the narrator sitting in a coffee house in London<sup>27</sup> observing the passing crowd. The manner in which “The Man of the Crowd” is a study of the city’s transformation at nightfall is examined in chapter four. The story features a number of key themes which are prevalent throughout this thesis. The beginning of the story is concerned primarily with identification, as the narrator attempts to place passersby into various taxonomic groups. He does this primarily through physiognomy and a study of clothing. The “noblemen, merchants and attorneys” are distinguishable from the crowd because “their habiliments belonged to that order which is pointedly termed decent.”<sup>28</sup> The narrator examines the various strata of urban society. Beneath the noblemen, the clerks wear “the cast-off graces of the gentry.”<sup>29</sup> The ability to read the crowd in this manner connects all of the flâneurs studied in this thesis, along with Benjamin whose interest in fashion is examined briefly later in this chapter.

The key themes of performance and masquerade are also present in “The Man of the Crowd.” The narrator draws attention to the “the race of swell pick-pockets,

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 172.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations* 172-3.

<sup>27</sup> Poe never saw 1840’s London in which “Man of the Crowd” is set, the inspiration for his short story being the streets of New York after dark.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Olive Mabbot (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) 510.

<sup>29</sup> Poe 510.

with which all great cities are infested,” commenting: “I watched these gentry with much inquisitiveness, and found it difficult to imagine how they should ever be mistaken for gentlemen by gentlemen themselves.”<sup>30</sup> The need to recognise charlatans within the crowd as an act of urban survival is made plain here. The twentieth century New York flâneur performs this act repeatedly whilst navigating the city, on account of the increased sense of threat and paranoia in the New World city.

The flâneur’s *nostalgie de la boue* is equally as present in Poe’s work as it is in Baudelaire’s. His eye is drawn by the city’s underbelly: “Jew peddlers,” “ruffians,” prostitutes and “drunkards.”<sup>31</sup> This interest intensifies further at night. Poe shows the same interest in the manner in which the crowd is both illuminated and distorted at night as in Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, or Huncke and Wojnarowicz, discussed in chapter four: “The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces.”<sup>32</sup>

Poe’s work also introduces us to the possibility that the flâneur may be interpreted as a form of stalker. Leaving the café, the narrator follows an old man through the streets for a period of approximately twenty-four hours. The old man himself appears to be locked into the act of flânerie, yet he too is thought to be periodically stalking others: “For some time he followed closely a party of some ten or twelve roisterers; but from this number one by one dropped off, until three only remained....”<sup>33</sup> The blurred line between flâneur and stalker in the New World city is considered predominantly in the final two chapters of this thesis, yet is implicit in all of the texts examined.

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<sup>30</sup> Poe 510.

<sup>31</sup> Poe 510.

<sup>32</sup> Poe 510.

<sup>33</sup> Poe 511.

The narrator's pursuit of the old man into the decaying back streets of the city can also be compared to the Beat Generation's interest in characters such as Huncke. As with the old man in "The Man of the Crowd," Huncke leads the Beats through a criminal underworld with which they are unfamiliar. To an extent, the common man is used as a means of extracting from the city material for the writer's work. Poe describes the city's pickpockets as parasitic: an "infestation".<sup>34</sup> However, both nineteenth and twentieth century flâneurs, on either side of the Atlantic, feed off the crowd in a similar manner, plucking images and experiences from the unsuspecting crowd.

There are a number of strong correspondences between Whitman's "Calamus" section, first appearing in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and Baudelaire's "Tableaux Parisiens," a section of poems added to the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Two poems in particular bind the old and new world flâneurs together: Baudelaire's "A Une Passante," and Whitman's "To a Stranger". Examined in unison, the two poems reveal a correspondence between urban experiences in Paris and New York, despite the geographical, topographical and cultural distance between the two cities. Both poets ponder a potential love affair with a stranger selected from the crowd. The theme of urban 'selection' and speculation is present throughout this thesis, in a number of varying guises. In chapter two, the wandering hipster selects black prostitutes from the crowd as objects of his desire. In chapter three, "A Une Passante" along with Whitman's "Are You the New Person Drawn Toward Me?" are examined in relation to Frank O'Hara's cruising. In chapter four, the wanderer singles out the drug dealer from the crowd and in chapter five, Bateman selects his prey.

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<sup>34</sup> Poe 510.



Although each are varied distortions of Baudelaire's love affair with the stranger, it is desire which drives the flâneur to read the city and propels him through the streets.

In "A Une Passante" and "To a Stranger," Baudelaire and Whitman address the flâneur's sexual desire in the nineteenth century city. The twentieth century wanderer's desire widens to commodities, narcotics and even blood. The root of the flâneur's parasitic desire to feed off the city is captured in these two poems. Baudelaire's poem captures the manner in which the city has the potential to offer a sexual spectacle: "A woman passed, with a glittering hand / Raising, swinging the hem and flounces of her skirt."<sup>35</sup> The image is reminiscent of O'Hara's "skirts flipping above heels,"<sup>36</sup> in "A Step Away from Them." In both cases, the sensuous motion of the cityplace is central. The "swinging" hem, or "flipping" of the skirt draws the flâneur's gaze. It is then the manner in which the motion momentarily reveals the hidden or intimate which holds his gaze. Baudelaire records a glance of the stranger's leg: "Agile and graceful, her leg was like a statue's"(5). Similarly, Whitman writes: "You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass."<sup>37</sup> Whitman's gaze becomes equally sexually charged as it moves from the eyes to the body. He refers to an exchange of spectacle, "you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return"(9-10). Yet for both Baudelaire and Whitman, their subject does not willingly participate in this transaction. As with Ginsberg in "Mugging," the subject's image is taken as forcibly as the manner in which the muggers steal his money and wristwatch. This phenomenon is examined in the following chapter.

The imbibing of the passerby's image has an almost narcotic effect on Baudelaire: "Tense as in a delirium, I drank / From her eyes,... The sweetness that

<sup>35</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "A Une Passante," *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. William Aggeler (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1954) <<http://fleursdumal.org/poem/224>>.

<sup>36</sup> Frank O'Hara, "A Step Away from Them," *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) 257.

<sup>37</sup> Walt Whitman, "To a Stranger," *Leaves of Grass* (London: Walter Scott, 1886) 37.

enthrals and the pleasure that kills”(6-8). Whitman is similarly sent on a flight of fancy, whereby he punctures the fleeting encounter by imagining a lifetime with the stranger: “You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me, / I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become / not yours only nor left my body mine only”(8-10). Baudelaire drinks from his subject’s eyes; he is parasitic in nature, draining that which he desires from her. Similarly, Whitman appropriates and forcibly imposes his own presence upon his subject’s life history.

Both poems end with a consideration of forces of attraction and repulsion present within the cityplace. As the motion of the crowd brings the flâneur his subject, it also carries the subject away. Both poets experience a corresponding longing and remorse. Baudelaire accepts the potential loss: “Will I see you no more before eternity? / Elsewhere, far, far from here! too late! *never* perhaps!” (11-12).

Conversely, Whitman battles against it: “I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone, / I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again. / I am to see to it that I do not lose you” (11-14).

Whitman clinging to his subject is symptomatic of a greater sense of threat and isolation which is felt in the New World city. The flâneur’s desire to forge allegiances with other marginalized groups within the cityplace is far more prominent in New York literature. This desire is discussed in chapters two and three with regards to Kerouac and O’Hara. Jonathan Arac recognises the manner in which the crowd “emerges only through an allusion to the noise of the street in the opening line” in “A Une Passante,” yet in “To a Stranger,” there is “not even the allusion; it is as though the speaker were alone with the stranger.”<sup>38</sup> This at first appears peculiar given that at the time the poems were written, the population of Manhattan was roughly double that

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<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Arac, “Whitman and Problems of the Vernacular,” *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, eds. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 56.

of Paris (excluding the *banlieue*). Arac agrees that Whitman's encounter "should be read under the sign of a populous city,"<sup>39</sup> yet the crowd's lack of presence signifies a greater distance between the flâneur and the masses than in Baudelaire.

The heightened sense of outsidership and isolation in Whitman stems partly from his role as a homosexual flâneur navigating the heterosexual matrix. In Geoffrey Wagner's translation of "A Une Passante," he puts emphasis on the gender of Baudelaire's subject, favouring "To a Woman Passing by,"<sup>40</sup> rather than simply "To a Passer-by," as in Aggeler. In Whitman's "To a Stranger," his subject is primarily and preferably male: "You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking"(3). The "Calamus" poems, named appropriately after the plant *Acorus calamus* whose reed resembles an erect penis, are a coded celebration of flânerie and homosexuality. In "A Glimpse,"<sup>41</sup> the flâneur's interest turns to the barroom: "A glimpse through an interstice caught, / Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around / the stove late of a winter night...."(1-3). There is a strong sense of voyeurism in this poem. The flâneur's viewpoint through an "interstice" suggests that he is outside, watching the men from the street. For Whitman, the 'glimpse' is equally salacious as Baudelaire's fleeting view of his female subject's leg. As a metaphorical and literal outsider, it offers him a view into the world of the blue collar, heterosexual male. Whitman's fascination with the rough workers who participate in "drinking, oath and smutty jest"(9) appears as almost a nineteenth century precursor to O'Hara's exoticisation of 1950s New York labourers, examined in the following chapter:

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<sup>39</sup> Arac 56.

<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Wagner, *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (New York: Grove Press, 1974) <<http://fleursdumal.org/poem/224>>.

<sup>41</sup> Whitman, "A Glimpse," *Leaves of Grass* 35.

“down the sidewalk / where labourers feed their dirty /glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets / on.”<sup>42</sup>

As in “To a Stranger,” Whitman separates an individual from the crowd and imagines him as a potential lover: “Of a youth who loves me and who I love, silently approaching and sitting himself near” (5-6). Whitman homoeroticizes the scene, silently holding hands with his ‘lover’ as the rowdy barroom banter continues around them. Both Ginsberg and O’Hara adopt Whitman’s strategy of ‘queering’ ‘straight space’ in their twentieth century depictions of street level Manhattan.

In “What Think You I Take my Pen in Hand,”<sup>43</sup> the distinction between heterosexual friendship and homosexual love becomes decidedly blurred:

But merely of two simple men I saw to-day on the pier  
in the midst of the crowd, parting the parting of dear friends,  
The one to remain hung on the other's neck and  
passionately kiss'd him,  
While the one to depart tightly prest the one to remain  
in his arms. (8-14)

The actions of the men insinuate that they are more than “dear friends”. It is unclear whether Whitman homoeroticizes the parting of two heterosexual men, or this is a depiction of an actual parting embrace of two gay men. The lack of tolerance to public displays of sexual ‘otherness’ in nineteenth century Manhattan suggests that the former is more likely. Throughout New York’s history the piers have been infamous gay cruising locations. In “Among the Multitude”<sup>44</sup> Whitman himself draws allusions to cruising in the city: “Among the men and women the multitude, / I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs” (1-2). Here, Whitman echoes Baudelaire’s

<sup>42</sup> O’Hara, “A Step Away from Them,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 257.

<sup>43</sup> Whitman, “What Think You I Take my Pen in Hand,” *Leaves of Grass* 39.

<sup>44</sup> Whitman, “Among the Multitude,” *Leaves of Grass* 41.

words, deciding to “take a bath of multitude.”<sup>45</sup> As in “To a Stranger,” Whitman refers to the crowd as consisting of both men *and* women. However, “secret” signs can be interpreted specifically as a reference to the surreptitious, seductive interplay which takes place between gay men when cruising. Whitman is aware that as he observes the crowd, he himself is being observed as a potential lover. This theme is prominent throughout the following chapters; in the New World city, the flâneur is not only the watcher but also the watched.

Section eight of “Song of Myself” introduces Whitman’s inventorial approach to chronicling spectacle within the cityplace:

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the  
promenaders,  
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of  
the shod horses on the granite floor,  
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,  
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs,  
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,  
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,  
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his  
    passage to the centre of the crowd,  
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,  
What groans of over-fed or half-starv'd who fall sunstruck or in fits,  
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give  
    birth to babes,  
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Les Foules,” *Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1972) 54.

restrain'd by decorum,

Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections  
with convex lips,

I mind them or the show or resonance of them-I come and I depart.<sup>46</sup>

This particular section records a series of occurrences on Broadway. Among the stock urban images and sounds, “the heavy omnibus,...the clack of shod horses,” lies an implied threat. “Rous’d mobs,” and “enemies” are embedded into the passage, lurking as they would in a crowd. As Alan Trachtenberg recognises, the policeman or “figure of coercive authority...pushes his way to the centre of the crowd, indeed at the exact centre of the page itself.”<sup>47</sup> Whitman recognises the various forms of predator within the street and corresponding methods of surveillance. The policeman pushes his way to the centre as a symbol of control. At the centre of the crowd he assumes the position of the jailer at the centre of the Panopticon. The crowd, and passage itself, exists around him, and he is able to pick out and discipline transgressors. The crowd is divided into those who express their pain through anger and those whose “howls are restrain'd by decorum.” The presence of predators within the crowd along with various methods of street surveillance conducted by both the authorities and criminals is examined in chapters four and five.

Trachtenberg states that the picture that Whitman paints here is “a kaleidoscopic display of colliding images, visual and aural, fragmented narrative shards composing a tableau of untold stories, “living and buried speech” echoing from “impassive stones.””<sup>48</sup> In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”<sup>49</sup> Whitman repeatedly recognises the universality of the crowd dynamic. In section two he states: “The

<sup>46</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass* 36.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, “Whitman’s Lesson of the City,” *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, eds. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 169.

<sup>48</sup> Trachtenberg 168.

<sup>49</sup> Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” *Leaves of Grass* 57-64.

simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme, / The similitudes of the past and those of the future." Similarly, in section five he questions:

What is it then between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not--distance avails not, and place avails not,

I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,

I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island.

Whitman recognises himself in a tradition of urban walkers, the act of walking in the city links him to those who preceded him and those who will follow. The "narrative shards" which Whitman gathers whilst wandering can be seen as additions to a larger cross temporal mosaic which aims to replicate New York street life in its entirety.

Flâneurs succeeding Whitman contribute to this mosaic by adding further fragments.

For example, Whitman's tableau of the "half-starv'd who fall sunstruck or in fits," is developed by the likes of Wojanrowicz, who adds further fragmented images of a decaying *twentieth century* skid row to the mosaic. The arms of the crowd which

Whitman imagines 'around his neck' in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," become interlinked with the arm which reaches around Ginsberg's neck in "Mugging."<sup>50</sup>

Although the incidents are separated by over one hundred years, the crowd offers the flâneur the same cocktail of violence and tenderness and holds the same erotic

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<sup>50</sup> In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman blurs flâneur and frotteur: "Was called by my highest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me / approaching or passing, / Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh / against me as I sat...". Ginsberg's "Mugging," adds: "a boy stepped /up, put his arm around my neck / tenderly I thought for a moment, squeezed harder..." Allen Ginsberg, "Mugging," *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 486-9.

potential. The critical position of each of the flâneurs examined in this thesis may vary radically, yet Whitman's work explicates the manner in which they hold a shared practice and endeavour.

The Jewish translator, philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin is perhaps one of the most important figures in terms of the assessment and development of the flâneur as a literary device. Benjamin wrote extensively on the question of urban observation. The following will focus specifically upon his two most significant texts in terms of the flâneur, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* and his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*.

Benjamin's interest in the act he would later know as *flânerie* came at an early age. In his lyrical account of his childhood, "A Berlin childhood around 1900," Benjamin makes an "effort to get hold of the images in which the experience of the big city is precipitated in a child of the middle class."<sup>51</sup> The work presents a series of vignettes based on the young Benjamin's urban wanderings with and later without his mother. The vignettes are given subtitles, for instance in "Market Hall," Benjamin attempts to 'hold' the image of the covered marketplace which stood on Magdeburger Platz:

Your gaze ran first to the flagstones that were slimy with fish water or swill, and on which one could easily slip on carrots or lettuce leaves. Behind wire partitions, each bearing a number, slow moving market women were enthroned – priestesses of a venal Ceres, purveyors of all fruits of the field and orchard, all edible birds, fishes and mammals...<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Berlin Childhood around 1900," *Selected Writings 1935-38*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Hennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland et al. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001) 344.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin, "Childhood," 361-2.



Even at an early age Benjamin's eye is drawn by the spectacle of the market. His gaze begins at pavement level, focusing upon the detritus which gathers beneath the stalls. It is then drawn upwards to the 'priestesses' or stall keepers and then horizontally to the wealth of produce which surrounds him. Benjamin intimates that the stalls are altars to the Roman goddess of agriculture Ceres, at which the shoppers and stall keepers alike worship. This passage echoes the fascination which the New York flâneur has with the cornucopia of saleable goods available in the city. For example, in Thomas Beller's short story "World without Mothers," the teenage protagonists Nick and Alex venture into Manhattan at night without their parents' permission. They stumble across the Chelsea Wholesale Flower Market being restocked for the next days sale:

...surrounded by freshly cut flowers in heaps; it was a scene completely out of proportion to the neat bundles of cut flowers that sat politely in flower shops. Huge wooden crates filled with crushed ice lay around like open coffins, enormous bundles of flowers inside... The light in the room was sharp and white... Alex stared transfixed into a sea of flowers.<sup>53</sup>

As with Benjamin, the two young boys in "World without Mothers," are overawed by their surroundings. Both Benjamin and Beller use lists to emphasise the almost inexhaustible abundance of the marketplace and there is an intense focus on the myriad of colours, textures and smells which bombard the senses. Beller emphasises the difference between the neat bundles of flowers that sit politely in flower shops, and the huge bundles which are heaped in the market. This highlights the stark difference between the urban and the suburban experience. Nick and Alex are

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Beller, "A World without Mothers," *Seduction Theory* (London: Abacus, 1995) 116-7.

accustomed to small high street shops which have only a limited stock, they are struck by the comparative enormity of the urban market.

The city itself offers “fateful pleasures” and “enormous anxieties”<sup>54</sup> to the juvenile, yet Benjamin recalls lagging behind his mother during shopping trips with an apparent will to dawdle and explore alone. In *A World without Mothers*, the first activity Nick and Alex partake in after escaping the grip of their parents, is to try to enter a peep show on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street just off Times Square. In “Beggars and Whores” Benjamin recalls a similar sexual awakening whilst walking the Berlin streets:

I had, in fact, formed the habit of always lagging a half step behind her. It was as if I was determined not to form a united front with anyone, not even my mother. How much, after all, I owed to this dreamy recalcitrance – which came to the fore during our walks together through the city – was something I became aware of only later, when the urban labyrinth opened up to the sex drive...I eventually sensed the possibility of escaping her control with the help of these streets, in which I seemed to have difficulty finding my way. At any rate, there could be no doubt that an idea (unfortunately an illusory idea) of repudiating my mother, those like her, and the social class to which we belonged was at the bottom of that unparalleled excitement which drove me to accost a whore in the street.<sup>55</sup>

In many respects, Benjamin’s urban experiences in twentieth century Berlin mirror those of many a New York flâneur. Benjamin recognises the same opposing forces of control and desire which operate on the Manhattan street. The *form* of control may be different, for example, to the policeman in section 8 of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson, *Sphinx* 1.

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, “Childhood,” 404.

yet the temptation to transgress remains the same. The manner in which Benjamin depicts the act of wandering as a quasi-sexual act or route to sexual awakening is especially reminiscent of Frank O'Hara's poetry, namely "F. Missive & Walk) I. #53" discussed in chapter three. Benjamin's own "unparalleled excitement" can be compared to the thrill experienced by Kerouac whilst observing the Times Square whores in *Lonesome Traveler*. Similarly, the manner in which the city is portrayed as a labyrinth, a place in which the individual can hide, escape or disappear, in turn reminds us of Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*.

Although the streets of Berlin clearly fascinated Benjamin from an early age, it was to be Paris, his city of exile, which would be the centre-point for his key works with regards to the flâneur. Benjamin's work as a translator had led him to work on Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, which upon publication in 1923 was prefaced by his own essay, "The Task of the Translator". When the Nazis came to power in January 1933, Benjamin was already considering exile. Already having spent an extended stay in Paris, his love of the French capital and Baudelaire was such that there was little question as to which would be his chosen city of exile. Fleeing Berlin, Benjamin continued to make his money from writing, whilst simultaneously putting together a body of observational notes which would in time become his *Passagenwerk* or *Passagenarbeit* (Arcades Project).

We need look no further than "The Flâneur," chapter two of *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, to begin to understand how pertinent Benjamin's theoretical discourse is to the discussion of the twentieth century *New York* flâneur. At the beginning of the chapter, Benjamin discusses the manner in which the various classes find entertainment, referring to Edouard Foucard's *Physiologie de l'industrie française*:

Quiet enjoyment is almost exhausting for the working man...if a worker is idle, he will remain inaccessible to the charms of solitude. However, if a loud noise, or a whistle from a distant factory hit his ear...his face immediately brightens...the smoke from the tall factory chimney, the booming blows on the anvil, make him tremble with joy.”<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin acknowledges the rather patronizing tone of this extract, whilst simultaneously outlining the manner in which the physiologies helped shape how Paris was perceived at street level. In a rather perverse manner, the extract explains to a certain degree the New York flâneur’s fascination with his own city. As we have already discussed, the Parisian flâneur was traditionally thought of as a member of the upper classes. He took solace from people watching in the dignified cafes and arcades of the French capital. With regards to the New York flâneur, we find that more often than not he is a man of working class background, left idle upon the streets. In many respects, the extract which Benjamin uses from Foucard inadvertently prophesises the emergence of a new working class flâneur, one fascinated by noise, smoke and toil.

Benjamin goes on to discuss the dangers present in Baudelaire’s Paris, which again seem yet more pertinent to twentieth century New York. Benjamin draws reference to a report given by a Parisian secret agent stating that “It was almost impossible...to maintain good behaviour in a thickly populated area where an individual is, so to speak, unknown to all others and thus does not have to blush in front of anyone.”<sup>57</sup> This passage reminds us in part of Poe’s “Man of the Crowd”, but

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<sup>56</sup> Edouard Foucard, *Paris inventeur. Physiologie de l'industrie Française* (Paris, 1844) 222. qtd. in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Review 1968) 38.

<sup>57</sup> Adolphe Schmidt, *Tableaux de la Revolution Française, publiées sur les papiers inédits du départements et de la police secrete de Paris*, vol.3 (Leipzig, 1870) 337, qtd. in Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 40.

also of Jane Jacobs' comments upon the influx of 'strangers' into New York neighbourhoods discussed later in relation to Susan Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything*.

As the Parisian secret agent implies, when we are surrounded by people we are familiar with, our behaviour is monitored. This is clearly the atmosphere in villages, where there is a sense of community. Yet in the city, chances are we will never encounter the strangers surrounding us again, therefore our behaviour may go unchecked. This clearly applies to a densely populated area such as pre-9/11 New York, before police officers were called in from the outer boroughs and placed on every street corner. This in turn leads Benjamin to discuss the role of the flâneur as detective. We observe in the work of Poe and Baudelaire alongside works such as Dumas' *Mohicans de Paris* a fascination with the miscreant. The wandering protagonist's eye falls upon a suspicious character, whom after some observation he decides is a criminal. This fascination with the criminal underworld is also clearly present in twentieth century works of New York flânerie. Yet, in nineteenth century Paris, the flâneur appears to be removed from the criminal world which he observes. In New York, conversely, the lines between flâneur and criminal become distinctly blurred, especially in the case of Herbert Huncke.

Benjamin also takes time to comment extensively upon "A Une Passante," stating that unlike Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, this particular sonnet:

...presents the crowd not as the refuge of a criminal but as that of love which eludes the poet. One may say that it deals with the function of the crowd not in the life of the citizen but in the life of the erotic person....Far from eluding the erotic in the crowd, the apparition which fascinates him is brought to him by the crowd...[As a footnote

Benjamin points out] The motif of love for a woman passing by occurs in an early poem by Stefan George. The poet has missed the important thing: the stream in which the woman moves past, borne along by the crowd.<sup>58</sup>

Here Benjamin focuses upon another urban phenomenon which occurs readily in twentieth century New York literature. For example, David Schubert's "It is Sticky in the Subway," which tells of a fleeting encounter between a man and a woman on the subway, begins: "How I love this girl who until / This minute, I never knew existed on /The face of the earth".<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Frank O'Hara's "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53" transforms the city into a kind of sexual playground, in which potential lovers can chase/hide/run away from one another: "there you are trying to hide behind a fire hydrant..."<sup>60</sup>

The manner in which the poet and female passer-by are thrown together correlates closely with the discussion of Frank O'Hara's "Song," and crowd movement in chapter three. The lines of pedestrians flowing in opposite direction which form naturally in crowds, draw individuals together momentarily in passing. In Baudelaire's Paris, the pace of the city (which is reflected by the pace of the poem itself) would have allowed the poet to study a passer-by for a greater time than in twentieth century New York: "And I drank, trembling with as a madman thrills / from her eyes."<sup>61</sup> The nature of the narrow Manhattan streets, combined with the increased volume of fervour, would whisk away in little more than a flicker the 'apparition' which so fascinates Baudelaire

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 45-6.

<sup>59</sup> David Schubert, "It is Sticky in the Subway," *David Schubert: Works and Days* (Princeton, New Jersey: Quarterly Review of Literature, 1983) 48.

<sup>60</sup> Frank O'Hara, "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53," *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1995) 420.

<sup>61</sup> Baudelaire, "À Une Passante," qtd. in Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 118.

The term apparition relates closely to the manner in which Benjamin describes the Parisian ‘phantasmagoria’ in *The Arcades Project*. Derek Gregory underlines that in his early drafts:

Benjamin proposed to read the Paris Arcades as a dream world - “a dialectical fairy scene” – furnished by objects that were simultaneously desired and commodified...In his more developed sketches, which he worked on following his return to Paris, Benjamin both deepened and widened the project by representing the cultural landscape of the nineteenth-century Paris (and by extension, Europe) as a phantasmagoria.”<sup>62</sup>

The phantasmagoria was a form of magic lantern, first produced by Belgian Etienne Gaspard Robert. This particular lantern, as Gregory states, “used back projection to ensure that the audience remained largely unaware of the source of the image.”

Robert’s first show was in Paris in 1799 where he projected a series of flickering ghostly ‘apparitions’ to the amazement of the audience. Gregory understands Benjamin’s use of the term as “an allegory of modern culture,” thus explaining his insistence on “seeing commodity culture as a projection – not a reflection of the economy...and also his interest in the visual, optical, “spectacular” inscriptions of modernity.”<sup>63</sup>

In *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Benjamin notes that “Baudelaire knew how things stood for the literary man: as flâneur he goes into the marketplace, supposedly to take a look at it, but already in reality to find a buyer.”<sup>64</sup> In earlier sections of this chapter, we have examined the manner in which the flâneur is seen to be detached from society. He is in the crowd, yet he is not part of

<sup>62</sup> Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994) 231.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory 231.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 74.

it, taking on the role of observer or critic. As Susan Buck-Morss confirms in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, “the poet’s livelihood depended on the new, mass market in order to sell his poems, a fact of which Baudelaire was well aware.”<sup>65</sup> The poet’s increasing dependency on the marketplace is highly important in terms of the remoulding of the flâneur in twentieth century New York literature.

Morss goes on to describe the manner in which Benjamin himself recognises a change in the flâneur in *The Arcades Project*:

Benjamin describes the more modern forms of this social type: the reporter, a flâneur-become-detective covers the beat; the photojournalist hangs about like a hunter ready to shoot. The later entries emphasise that the flâneur is not truly a person of leisure (*Musse*). Rather, loitering (*Müssigang*) is his trade.<sup>66</sup>

Benjamin sets this particular genus of flâneur apart from the intellectual flâneurs, such as Baudelaire. The difference between the two are the nature of their activities, leisure vs. loiter. It is clear that the New York flâneurs which we examine in subsequent chapters fall somewhere between the two categories designated by Benjamin. They are often intellectuals, yet they are also loiterers: tied to the street through a combination of poverty, unemployment and/or a conscious choice to partake in ‘drop out’ culture. Simultaneously, they share the same fascination and connection to street life as displayed by Baudelaire and the young Benjamin. For example, in “Mugging,” which is discussed later in greater detail, Ginsberg is making his way to the ‘marketplace’ with a bag full of poetry when he is attacked and robbed by a gang of youths. The youths steal his cheap watch but neglect to take the poetry which is worth a substantial amount of money. Without going into too much detail at this point, it is

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<sup>65</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999) 185

<sup>66</sup> Buck-Morss 306.



nevertheless clear that, as with Baudelaire, Ginsberg depends on the new mass market, yet his venturing into the 'marketplace' puts him at a far greater risk from other loiterers. His home on the Lower East Side means that unlike the aristocratic Parisian flâneur with a *nostalgie de la boie*, he does not only observe the gutter and then withdraw; the gutter exists outside his door.

Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* is a key text in terms of the study of flânerie and urban experience. The focus of the project is nineteenth century Paris, yet much of Benjamin's work remains strikingly relevant when applied to twentieth century Manhattan. The konvoluts I have selected for scrutiny deal specifically with themes which prove recurrent in the contemporary New York material examined in the following chapters.

### **Konvolut B: Fashion**

Benjamin quotes Alfonse Karr regarding the importance of fashion in the cityplace: "Nothing has a place of its own, save fashion appoints that place."<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in twentieth century New York, appearance dictates a sense of place. The bearded, long-haired Ginsberg is abused when venturing uptown, outside of the Village,<sup>68</sup> whilst the besuited Bateman blends into the Midtown crowd, but is uncomfortably out of place when mixing with "punk rockers" and "blacks" in a downtown club.<sup>69</sup>

Benjamin goes on to state that "each season brings, in its newest creations, various secret signals of things to come. Whoever understands how to read these semaphores would know in advance not only about new currents in the arts but also

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999) 63.

<sup>68</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Uptown," *Selected Poems 1947-1995* (London: Penguin, 1996) 369.

<sup>69</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador 1991) 190.

about new legal codes, wars, and revolutions.”<sup>70</sup> Fashion also continues to offer a set of “secret signals” in New York. Lila’s labrys earring in *Girls. Visions and Everything*, reveals her sexuality to those who can read the signal. Fashion is also used to mask identity. In the 50s the hipster wears zoot suits and vogues as being black whilst in the 80s gangs of rich kids dress as punks; a sign of the dominant classes appropriating a sub culture. Fashion is used to falsely ‘appoint place’ in New York. To read fashion’s ‘semaphores’ correctly at street level, is to be able to distinguish between the insider and outsider, the natural and the masquerade.

### **Konvolut M: The Flâneur**

In terms of the flâneur reading the crowd, Benjamin states that the journalist Alfred “Delvau believes that he can recognise the social strata of Parisian society in flânerie as easily as a geologist recognises geological strata.”<sup>71</sup> This in itself would be quite a feat, given Benjamin’s earlier reference to Valery Larbaud’s comments on the nature of the Parisian crowd: “In this crowd the inferior is disguised as the superior, and the superior as the inferior – disguised morally, in both cases.”<sup>72</sup> As explored in the following chapters, the New York flâneur experiences a similar quandary whilst reading the crowd; black New Yorkers attempt to pass as white and vice versa, police pose as criminals and criminals pose as businessmen. The New York crowd is consequently unreadable to the untrained eye.

As Benjamin points out, “the phantasmagoria of the flâneur: to read from faces the profession, the ancestry, the character.”<sup>73</sup> This is true for both Old and New World flâneurs. However, with a heightened sense of danger in the New World metropolis, the flâneur must assess the passerby in terms of potential threat, assessing each

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<sup>70</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 64.

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 435.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 418.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 429.

pedestrian's intention for being on the street. Benjamin draws upon an article concerning Poe's "Man of the Crowd" from *La Semaine*: "Our eye is fixed on the man in society who moves among laws, snares, the betrayal of confederates, as a savage in the New World moves among reptiles, ferocious beasts and enemy tribes."<sup>74</sup>

Somewhat ironically, the New World flâneur continues to move among 'laws' and 'snares', but similarly has to navigate his way through 'creeps' such as Huncke, 'beasts' like Bateman and urban tribes who defend the boundaries of Manhattan's micro-communities.

Benjamin's quotation of Ferdinand Lion compliments Whitman's work on how the city's present is connected to its past: "Whoever sets foot in a city feels caught up as in a web of dreams, where the remote past is linked to the events of today. One house allies another, no matter what period they come from, and a street is born."<sup>75</sup> Benjamin also quotes Odilon Redon stating that: "The sense of mystery, [in the city] ...comes from remaining always in the equivocal, with double and triple perspectives."<sup>76</sup> The New York flâneur is similarly aware of the interconnecting spatial and temporal layers along with a multitude of perspectives which form the metropolis. For example, nightfall in New York highlights the spatial dimensions of duality produced within the cityplace, as a sinister 'shadow population' takes to the streets. The hipsters' venturing into nocturnal Harlem, also reveals 'double and triple perspectives': The White Negro attempting to see New York through the eyes of the African American, juxtaposed with the perspective of the Black Harlemite witnessing the invasion of his turf.

Furthermore, as with Lion's Paris, New York can also be seen as an exotic, luxuriant "web of dreams." Benjamin draws our attention to the manner in which

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<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 440

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 435.

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 429.

areas of Paris are exoticised as a savannah. The courtyard of the Tuileries is referred to as an “immense savannah planted with lampposts instead of banana trees,” while the Passage Colbert has a gas lamp that “looks like a coconut palm in the middle of a savannah.”<sup>77</sup> These descriptions parallel O’Hara’s transformation of Manhattan’s elevator cables into “lianas,”<sup>78</sup> lampposts into ‘preying mantises,’<sup>79</sup> or Kerouac’s ‘exotic’ distortion of Harlem.

### **Konvolut T: Modes of Lighting**

Here Benjamin discusses the transition from oil lighting to gas and finally to electricity in Paris. New York experienced the same phenomenon. Pamela Jones states:

It was Rubens Peale...who introduced the charms and infinite possibilities of gas lighting to New York...In 1816...a crude gas-making apparatus was erected near City Hall, with temporary tin pipes running down Chatham Street and on Broadway...[By 1826] New Yorkers bathed in the magical illumination.<sup>80</sup>

Reporters such as George G. Foster were fascinated by this magical phenomenon and chronicled the seamier side of nocturnal Manhattan in “New York by Gaslight” (1850). For Foster, gaslight helped penetrate “the thick veil of night and lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis.”<sup>81</sup> Benjamin was similarly fascinated by the ‘magical illuminations’ of the arcades which “radiated like fairy grottoes...for someone entering the Passage de Panoramas in 1817, the sirens of the gaslight would be singing to him on one side, while oil-lamp odalisques offered enticements from the

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 422.

<sup>78</sup> Frank O’Hara, “Rhapsody,” *Collected Poems* 325-6.

<sup>79</sup> O’Hara, “F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53,” *Collected Poems* 420.

<sup>80</sup> Pamela Jones, *Under the City Streets: A History of Subterranean New York* (New York: Holt, 1978) 72-5.

<sup>81</sup> George G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 69.

other.”<sup>82</sup> With regards to outdoor lighting Benjamin draws on the manner in which lantern carriers would escort passersby to their homes.<sup>83</sup> Issues regarding lighting remain prominent in twentieth century New York. Chapter four examines Manhattan’s nocturnal population, examining a ‘battle’ between daylight and shadow. As the lantern carriers lit the virtuous pedestrians’ way through the criminal darkness, Huncke witnesses the manner in which city planners take a wrecking ball to the shadowy buildings of old New York in favour of structures which illuminate the street with the aim of combating crime.

In terms of the shift from gas lighting to electricity, Benjamin draws upon George Montorgueil’s *Paris au hazard* (1895). Montorgueil says the arcades became a “dreamlike setting, where the yellowish flickering of the gas is wedded to the lunar frigidity of electric light.”<sup>84</sup> In terms of ambience, the introduction of electric lighting to nineteenth century Parisian arcades parallels the introduction of neon<sup>85</sup> to the twentieth century temple to consumerism, Times Square. Where electric light cast a “lunar frigidity,” neon emitted a Martian glow. If Benjamin saw the arcades as “fairy grottoes,” Huncke and Wojnarowicz’s depictions of Times Square, discussed in chapter four, have far more disturbing otherworldly connotations.

### **Flâneur as ‘Foreigner’**

Public areas remain the *mise-en-scène*, the street is still the flâneur’s “dwelling,”<sup>86</sup> the walls of New York remain “the desk against which he presses his notebooks,”<sup>87</sup> the cafeterias and bars continue to be “the balconies from which he

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<sup>82</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 564.

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 563.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades* 562.

<sup>85</sup> The first “neon spectacular” to be erected in Times Square was in 1924 showing an advertisement for Willy’s-Overland Jeep. Louis M. Brill. “Times Square: One Hundred Years and Moving on,” *LED News* Jan 2005. <<http://www.lumacom.com.au/pdfs/2005/January2005/January%202005%20-%20Article.pdf>>.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 45.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 45.

looks down on his household after his work is done.”<sup>88</sup> His goal is to seek out the forgotten or unnoticed treasures of urban life, to develop a sensual understanding of the city itself. Nevertheless, the flâneur too has metamorphosised during his move from gas-lit Paris to neon-bathed New York. He remains “a marginal figure...tending to be portrayed as isolated from those he observes,”<sup>89</sup> however, he is set apart from the crowd due to issues of gender, sexuality, race, or poverty. He is no longer a decadent aristocratic gentleman. He is a vagrant, a hustler, a drifter, a drunk, an addict or a gay cruiser. He has even shed his traditionally masculine role to become a female sightseer, a lesbian protester.

Due to the inversion of the flâneur’s role, the separation between him or herself and the crowd is less likely to be a separation of choice. The nineteenth century Parisian flâneur purposefully remained aloof from the crowd due to his social ranking. The urban spectacle provided by the behaviour of the lower orders was, in a way, a form of entertainment for the eccentric aristocrat.<sup>90</sup> Yet he had the means to withdraw from the street to his own world whenever he wished.

With regards to the New York flâneur we feel that s/he<sup>91</sup> is *forced* to live at the very edge of society because of his or her difference. This of course allows the flâneur to critique society from an outsider’s perspective, yet it also creates issues of proteophilia and proteophobia. The flâneur is a foreigner in the city in which s/he

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<sup>88</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 45.

<sup>89</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 45.

<sup>90</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 7.

<sup>91</sup> The use of s/he is a momentary acknowledgement that the flâneur can be both male and female. However, this thesis supports Doreen Massey’s view that the flâneuse (the gender inversion of flâneur) is impossible. Massey comments: “the notion of a flâneuse is impossible precisely because of the one-way-ness and the directionality of the gaze. Flâneurs observed others; they were not observed themselves. And, for reasons which link together the debate on perspective and the spatial organization of painting, and most women’s exclusion from the public sphere, the modern gaze belonged to men.” Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) 234. The flâneur is a modernist male construct and is gendered accordingly throughout this thesis. This is not to deny women the trajectory of the road, but to acknowledge that in playing the flâneur women take on a traditionally masculine role. For example in chapter five, Lila will be referred to as the lesbian flâneur, rather than flâneuse. This proves somewhat more appropriate following an examination of the manner in which she dresses in drag whilst partaking in the walk.

lives. S/he takes a different route through life to the average citizen, which causes him or her to be ostracized by the masses. From one perspective the flâneur (foreigner) revels in this anonymity. In *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva elaborates on the outsider's tendency towards self aggrandizement, stating:

The foreigner feels strengthened by the distance that detaches him from the others as it does from himself and gives him the lofty sense not so much of holding the truth but making it and himself relative while others fall victim to the ruts of monovalency. For they are perhaps the owners of things, but the foreigner tends to think that he is the only one to have a biography, that is, a life made up of ordeals – neither catastrophes nor adventures (although these might equally happen), but simply a life in which acts constitute events because they imply choice, surprises, breaks, adaptations, or cunning, but neither routine nor rest. In the eyes of the foreigner those who are not foreign have no life at all: barely do they exist, haughty or mediocre, but out of the running and thus almost already cadaverized.<sup>92</sup>

Kristeva's complex description of the foreigner correlates closely with the character of the New York flâneur encountered in the following chapters. As with the foreigner, the flâneur displays contempt for the populace of the city in which s/he lives, feeling empowered by solitude. The flâneur is a social spectator, but also a social analyst, s/he believes that s/he can understand society by observing and recounting fleeting moments. Yet all the flâneur sees are fragments of the social matrix. S/he can never become the god-like omniscient that s/he longs to be, s/he will never understand the city as a whole. Why then does the flâneur/foreigner adopt this air of aloofness?

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<sup>92</sup> Kristeva 7.

According to Kristeva it is a symptom of rejection, a mask behind which any vulnerable outsider will hide. The flâneur has a tendency to criticize society because s/he does not feel part of it. The proteophobe is, in secret, a proteophile, longing to be accepted by the world surrounding him or her. S/he hates and loves the crowd simultaneously. His or her wandering is a quest for an entry point into an unwelcoming society.

Consequently, the flâneur appears wary of society in general, the crowd is equated with threat. The flâneur plays at being the amateur detective, constantly assessing the crowd, paranoid of attack. Yet paradoxically, there is the distinct sentiment that the flâneur desires to be accepted by society, to become part of the urban sprawl.

**“Manhattan is a counter-Paris, an anti-London.”**

This change in the flâneur’s relationship with other pedestrians can be attributed in no small part to the characteristics of the New World city into which he has been transposed. As the protagonist in Paul Auster’s “The Locked Room” states, Paris is an “old-world city”<sup>93</sup> and could be considered to be the antithesis of New World New York. Within the *Périphérique*, areas which escaped the order of Haussmannization offer a tangle of crisscrossed boulevards intertwined with meandering *ruelles*. Central and Uptown Manhattan, conversely, adhere to a rigid grid system of streets and avenues. From above, the physical/spatial layout of the city resembles a block mosaic.

To state that Paris and New York are topographically distinct is to merely touch upon one of the innumerable differences between the two cities in their contemporary state. Yet, with regards to topographical diversity alone, the difficulties

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<sup>93</sup> Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987) 287.



involved in transporting the 'old world' concept of the flâneur into a 'new world' city and vice versa are quite clear. The move involves a marked discomfort and a consequent need to acclimatize to the new surroundings. The way in which the pedestrian thinks and moves through his newly adopted city must change significantly. The contrasting topographies of Paris and New York offer a vastly diverse urban experience for the pedestrian. Navigation of the New World city requires a different methodological approach. In Paris, navigation is improvised. The pedestrian heads in the general direction of his destination, spontaneously selecting shortcuts, losing himself, and then finding himself again. In Manhattan, the pedestrian's course between point A and point B is almost invariably a series of straight lines, and ninety degree turns to the left or to the right. It is almost impossible for the pedestrian to lose his way. The topography of the 'old world' city almost appears to encourage wandering, whilst the grid system enforces a certain directness. This contrast is in no small part due to the contrasting manner in which the cities developed. The 'old world' cities, Paris, London and Vienna, amongst others, had and continue to have an organic ambience.

As with a number of developing cities on America's eastern seaboard, nineteenth century Manhattan cast its eyes across the Atlantic to Europe for topographic inspiration. As Douglas Tallack points out in his essay "New York, New York," a poor copy of Victorian London could be found "at the tip of Manhattan and...a poor copy of Parisian modernity around Union and Madison Squares."<sup>94</sup> The grid system itself dates officially from 1811. It is arguable that inspiration came from the sale of the DeLancey farms in 1780, whereby the once arable land was sold off in blocks and lots. A further move toward the grid system was made in 1790, when City

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<sup>94</sup> Tallack <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/tallack2.htm>>.

Surveyor, Casimir Goerck, chalked out sections of civic land into a larger rectilinear grid. In 1806, aware of the need for expansion, the city requested the state legislature to appoint Commissioners to develop plans for the prospective northward growth of the conurbation. Without specific instructions, or for that matter an inspirational figurehead such as Baron Haussmann in Paris, the Commissioners chose to settle for Goerck's *rational* approach. After four years in the making, a map was drafted.

Tallack comments:

The Plan forwarded New York's commercial aims by laying out a rational city north of 14<sup>th</sup> Street and the twisted maze of streets downtown. The 1811 plan projected the grid north to 115<sup>th</sup> Street and the village of Harlem at a time when none of the Commissioners had much of an inkling of the logic of urban development. The map itself was eight feet long and it is hardly a surprise that the metaphors of frontier expansion and taming of the wilderness were transferred from continental expansion to New York's northward expansion.<sup>95</sup>

North of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the rigid grid was to spread over the island, cancelling out any existing roads or pathways, steamrolling over houses and farms, oblivious to hills, streams or marshes. As Tallack points out, the grid would conquer the 'wilderness,' slowly but surely replacing the organic with a *linear* rationality. Little survived the plan, other than the diagonal sash of Broadway, running northeast from the Battery and veering northwards a number of blocks prior to 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The grid was therefore 'in place' long before the majority of Manhattan had developed to fill it. This, in many respects, quashed the public's thrill and anticipation of watching the new world city develop. By the time it had reached its centennial anniversary in 1911, the

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<sup>95</sup> Tallack <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/tallack2.htm>>.

gridiron had been repeatedly criticized for its lack of imagination. Plans to divide up the rigid block structure with Parisian style arcades never came to fruition.

Consequently, the anniversary passed without celebration.

Le Corbusier best described the Parisian discomfort with New York. In an article in the *New York Times Magazine* commenting that, despite the grid system, the city was "...utterly lacking in order and harmony and the comforts of the spirit which must surround humanity. The skyscrapers are little needles all crowded together. They should be great obelisks, far apart, so that the city would have space and light and air and order..."<sup>96</sup> Le Corbusier insinuates that New York City is claustrophobic, that there is not enough space, light or air. Again this reflects on the Commissioners' lack of vision in terms of the prospective 'verticality' of the city. The commissioners expected mid and uptown Manhattan to develop in a similar manner to that of the downtown area; row after row of buildings no more than a few stories high. They did not envisage such a rapid increase in the island's population and the eventual need for multi-storey living and office space. The grid was by no means designed to incorporate the skyscraper.

The verticality of the city challenges the rationality of the grid. The grid imposes a certain degree of order, yet as Le Corbusier recognizes, the height of the skyscrapers coupled with the narrowness of the streets is suffocating. This in turn leads to a frenzied atmosphere on the streets. People and cars all packed in together, all scurrying for space. When the protagonist in Auster's 'The Locked Room' travels from his hometown of New York to Paris he experiences contrasting symptoms of agoraphobia. No longer enclosed in the matrix of towering skyscrapers, he feels

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<sup>96</sup> H.L. Brock, "Le Corbusier Scans Gotham's Towers," *New York Times Magazine* 3 Nov. 1935: 22

overwhelmed by space, dwarfed by the “vast and amorphous”<sup>97</sup> sky which stretches above him. For the Parisian the rectilinear streets of New York are restrictive, whereas for the New Yorker the wide boulevards of Paris leave him feeling exposed.

One of Tallack’s arguments in “New York, New York,” is that Manhattan’s gridded terrain does not encourage *flânerie*. He states that “by the time New York had both density and newness (the qualities revelled in by the *flâneur*), the machine age was upon it and *flânerie* was even more inappropriate.”<sup>98</sup> Tallack does not address how the machine age effects the act of *flânerie*. We presume that he refers to the introduction of the automobile to the city, which will be discussed later. Nevertheless, putting aside for a moment the restrictions imposed on pedestrian movement by the car filled metropolis, it is clear that the anecdotal elements of Tallack’s essay somewhat scupper his assertion that New York is an inappropriate space in which to indulge in *flânerie*.

Somewhat paradoxically, Tallack muses on how the structure of the grid creates certain spectacles. At the beginning of his essay he reveals how the grid has become the site of the most extravagant acts, describing how the “renowned roller-blader of Fifth Avenue consistently beats the traffic to Central Park South and turns the intersections on the way into arenas for extravagant pirouettes.”<sup>99</sup> He also describes how in the nineteenth century the wind, at the intersection of Fifth Avenue, Twenty-third Street and Broadway would whistle “round the prow of the Flatiron” and lift women’s skirts above their ankles. He reveals that “A man standing there would have been interpreted as hanging around with intent rather than promenading,

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<sup>97</sup> Auster 287.

<sup>98</sup> Tallack <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/tallack2.htm>>.

<sup>99</sup> Tallack.

and the NYPD would have moved him on with the embarrassing shout ‘23<sup>rd</sup> skidoo!’”<sup>100</sup>

These anecdotes demonstrate the manner in which the Manhattan cityspace generates or at least encourages spectacle. The women, whose skirts are lifted by the wind, do not wish to make a spectacle of themselves. It is a quirk in the layout of Madison Square Park, namely the manner in which the drafts through the city’s passages are intensified by the design of the Flatiron building, which causes their skirts to billow. Momentarily they become sex symbols, their stance subtly reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe standing above the subway air outlet in *The Seven-Year Itch*. Voyeuristic men loiter to see this titillating, almost ‘theatrical’ performance. Similarly, Tallack’s contemporary anecdote of the roller-blader reveals that even in the overcrowded, machine-age metropolis, there continues to be momentary ‘openings’ of space for performance. Manhattan may not have the vast squares of European cities, yet the few seconds at intersections when all traffic lights are on stop open up a window of opportunity for the roller-blader to display his or her skills before the space is once again filled with traffic.

We would presume that the flâneur would thrive on these instances. Yet, in spite of Manhattan’s ability to ‘generate’ a very unique series of spectacles at street level, Tallack remains unconvinced that the city is an appropriate terrain for the flâneur. Tallack argues that the layout of old world cities allowed the nineteenth century flâneur to become “hopelessly lost.” He quite rightly states that being hopelessly lost is virtually impossible in Manhattan, the pedestrian can only become ‘rationally’ lost: “...the grid generates its obverse. It is supposed to help people find their way around but, frequently [one ends up] rationally lost: that is five or six blocks

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<sup>100</sup> Tallack.

east or west of where one wanted to be. An excess of rationalism turns into rational excess.”<sup>101</sup> The numerical street names add to this rational excess. In Manhattan we are not met with elegant addresses such as *Avenue des Champs Elysees* (Paris), *Albermarle Street* (London) or *Via del Babuino* (Rome). More often than not, Manhattan addresses offer a glut of numbers. Ginsberg lived in apartment 14 at 170 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. O’Hara lived at 441 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street. The question remains: can the act of flânerie, an essentially irrational act, be performed amongst rational excess? To disagree with Tallack, the act of flânerie is by no means impossible or inappropriate within the gridiron. Nevertheless, it is highly apparent that the methodology behind the act must change in some shape or form.

As the pedestrian turns through ninety degrees to his or her left at an intersection in Manhattan he or she is met with a violent and dramatic change, a series of brand new images. In an old world city the winding streets *progressively* reveal the ‘unseen’ to the pedestrian. Strolling along the Quai St. Bernard in Paris which follows the curve of the Seine, the Jardin des Plantes on our left, the Ile de la Cité slowly comes into view. Drawing closer, we see a fragment of Notre-Dame, and as we round the apex of the curve the spectacular cathedral reveals itself in its entirety. This kind of occurrence is less likely to happen in Manhattan. Walk along 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and turn left up Seventh Avenue and the visual assault of Times Square hits us without warning.

Guy Debord, the leading figure in the Situationist International, suggests that one way to reread the city is to adapt the practice of flânerie to suit the topography, pace and lifestyle of the New World city. Debord introduces the term *dérive*, which literally means *drifting*. He states that:

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<sup>101</sup> Tallack.

Among the various situationist methods is the *dérive*, a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The *dérive* entails playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects; which completely distinguish it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. In the *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action...and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the attractions they find there.<sup>102</sup>

Debord suggests that *dérive* is a more appropriate practice for the postmodern urban observer than strolling. Although the term translates as 'drifting' in English, Debord asserts that the practice is by no means a passive act. He argues that there is a certain blasé attitude associated with the nineteenth century strolling dilettante. The walking methodologist (as Debord refers to the flâneur figure in postmodernity) has to adopt a far more assertive approach to flânerie. With *dérive* less is left to chance. The Parisian flâneur strolled through the city, leisurely taking in the sights and sounds. Stimulation came to him sporadically, a consequence of losing himself within the Périphérique of the 'old world' city, and stumbling across something utterly unexpected. The walking methodologist, however, actively seeks out stimulus. He remains a wanderer, yet in terms of *dérive*, his wandering can be seen to have some form of contingency. He is no longer blasé about when and where stimulus comes to him, he becomes a detective, a hunter. He searches for clues within the city, which will lead him to a spectacle.

This 'rational' form of flânerie is highly appropriate with regards to New York's grid system. It is quite clear that 'losing oneself' is almost impossible in the

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<sup>102</sup> Guy Debord, "The Theory of *Dérive*," *Situationist International: Anthology*, ed. trans. Ken Knabb (California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 54.

centre of a 'new world' city. Rather than considering the grid as architectural control of pedestrian movement, it can be perceived as a 'mathematical aid' to ludic peregrination. At the end of each block the walking methodologist is offered a choice and a new set of possibilities. He can turn left, right or continue straight ahead. The choice of direction is a response to inducement. Which direction is most enticing? Which will lead him to the next fascinating spectacle? At the end of the next block (the equivalent of one twentieth of a mile or eighty metres) the same set of questions must be asked again. Left, right, or straight ahead, which is most enticing? It is quite clear that, repeated block after block, this form of movement offers an infinitesimal number of possibilities. The core of gridded streets and avenues in New York City offers long corridors of vision for the walking methodologist. As a result of this, enticement can come in the form of a minute blue flashing light spotted x blocks away, or a commotion encountered at the next corner. The scope of the flâneur is consequently increased with his move to the New World.

Despite this, Zygmunt Bauman suggests in his essay "Desert Spectacular" that the Manhattan streets are an improper "grazing ground for the flâneur's imagination."<sup>103</sup> Bauman outlines that in order to conduct the act of flânerie, "first, the streets must be wide enough so that 'hanging around' [and] 'stopping once in a while to look around', can be physically possible. Secondly there must be enough interest in the street and houses that flank it to allure those who have time and urge to hang around."<sup>104</sup>

'Hanging around' is certainly frowned upon in New York. We have already learned from Tallack how any man caught hanging around the Flatiron was thought to be loitering with intent and we discover later the manner in which both Herbert

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<sup>103</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "Desert Spectacular," *The Flâneur*, ed. Keith Tester (London: Routledge, 1994) 146.

<sup>104</sup> Bauman 147.



Huncke and David Wojnarowicz avoided standing on street corners for too long for fear of attracting police attention. The act of stopping also poses physical problems. The streets, certainly in the busiest areas, are not wide enough to allow the flâneur to stop and gaze. Come to an abrupt halt in the middle of the sidewalk on any of the crowded Manhattan avenues and without exception the pedestrian behind will bump into you, then push past followed by a stream of disgruntled others. By stopping, the pedestrian can be seen to be partially clogging one of the many arterioles through which the city's lifeblood flows.

Robert Musil writes in *The Man Without Qualities* that "cities can be recognized by their pace just as people can by their walk."<sup>105</sup> If this is indeed the case, Paris, or for that matter Vienna, bears very little resemblance to twentieth century New York City. Within the grid system, life is conducted at breakneck speed. As Rem Koolhaas states, the "grid's two-dimensional discipline...creates undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy. The grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, [and] a metropolis of rigid chaos."<sup>106</sup> Yet, as we already know, the term 'flâneur' originates from the French verb 'flâner', meaning to saunter or to lounge. Elizabeth Wilson describes the Baudelairean flâneur as:

A 'gentleman' who spends most of the day roaming the streets observing the urban spectacle -- the fashions in dress and adornment, the buildings, the shops, the books, the novelties and attractions. A kind of voyeur with an endless curiosity for witnessing the ordinary scenes of city life...His interests are primarily aesthetic and he

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Eithene Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953) 3.

<sup>106</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: The Monacelli Press) 20.

frequents cafés and restaurants where actors, journalists, writers and artists gather.<sup>107</sup>

The Baudelairean *flâneur*'s movements are performed *adagio*. There is an explicit easiness about his idle wandering, his café lifestyle, his casual observations. It is difficult to believe that this lifestyle could be recreated in the New York which Rem Koolhaas describes. Can the *flâneur* 'saunter' through a "metropolis of rigid chaos"?<sup>108</sup> The New World city clearly has a great deal to offer the "voyeur with an endless curiosity for witnessing the ordinary scenes of city life."<sup>109</sup> With regards to New York, the *flâneur*'s 'freedom' to saunter must be brought into question. The congestion in the streets of the metropolis make it nigh on impossible to saunter. The New York streets are characteristically "vibrant, lively [and] kinetic."<sup>110</sup> The crowds which surge through these streets each day set the pace of life and resistance to this pace is futile. The *flâneur* *must* consequently rid himself of his nonchalance and become attuned to the 'allegro' tempo of the city. This in turn suggests that the New York *flâneur* (or saunterer) cannot saunter. Thus, the term appears inappropriate when applied to anyone walking in Manhattan or indeed any other fast-paced New World metropolis. Tallack further suggests that Manhattan does not encourage *flânerie* due to the danger of being mugged:

In the guidebook which I use the visitor to New York is given advice on how not to look like an out-of-towner. And wandering slowly around with no obvious purpose, standing on street corners gazing in a detached manner at skyscrapers or at commodity fetishism in action (or

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<sup>107</sup> Wilson, *Sphinx* 94-5.

<sup>108</sup> Koolhaas 20.

<sup>109</sup> Wilson, *Sphinx* 94.

<sup>110</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989) 18.

at the crazies), breaks rules 1, 2, 5 and 8 on how to avoid getting mugged.<sup>111</sup>

If New York is indeed a counter-Paris, then to (dis)place a nineteenth century Parisian in twentieth century New York (or for that matter a New Yorker in twentieth century Paris) is to invert his or her life completely. The myriad of differences between life in nineteenth century Paris and life in twentieth century New York have pressed upon the persona of the flâneur and moulded him accordingly. How then can we expect the flâneur, a creature of nineteenth century Paris, to remain unchanged when transported to twentieth century New York City? If the differences between twentieth century Paris and twentieth century New York are innumerable, then *nineteenth* century Paris must have very little in common with post-modern New York.

Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* demonstrates that the flâneur *has* been transported away from his birthplace before. The first volume of Musil's work is set in Vienna on the brink of the First World War. Ulrich, the novel's protagonist, possesses all of the qualities of a nineteenth century flâneur: uncommitted, passive and quite unattached. Most importantly, however, Ulrich is an observer. At the beginning of the first chapter of *The Man Without Qualities* Ulrich, we are told, "had spent the last ten minutes, watch in hand, counting cars, carriages, trams, and the faces of pedestrians obliterated by the distance, all of which filled the net of his gaze with a vortex of haste."<sup>112</sup> Phillip Payne claims that "the narrator sees Ulrich's retina – in German 'Netzhaut' – as literally a net in which he collects material for his study."<sup>113</sup> Ulrich undeniably possesses characteristics inherent in the Baudelairean flâneur. It is

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<sup>111</sup> Fallack.

<sup>112</sup> Musil 7.

<sup>113</sup> Philip Payne, *Robert Musil's 'The Man Without Qualities': A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 70

arguable then that Ulrich's character, in certain respects, serves as a link between the nineteenth century Parisian flâneur and the wandering observer who is present in twentieth century New York literature. After all, Ulrich contends with aspects of city life (traffic for one) which the nineteenth century Parisian dilettante would not have experienced. Nevertheless, the scene for Ulrich's flânerie is "that ancient and imperial city Vienna", which, like Paris, is an 'old world' city with an 'old world' topography. When the flâneur is transported to Vienna he experiences a new country, when he is transported to New York he experiences a new world. The question must be asked, how does New York City shape the flâneur into something almost unrecognisable from his nineteenth century counterpart? Chris Jenks recognizes this, stating:

[It is a necessity for the postmodern flâneur to] shake off the 'blasé attitude' and proceed to a critical appreciation of the falsehood, fabrication and replication at the heart of postmodernity's volatile network of meaning – so often symbolised as the 'city' ... today's flâneur requires engagement with the crowd. The imperative would seem to be 'stroll on' and with the reflexive knowledge that 'when the going gets tough, the postmodern analyst goes shopping'. This ironic (reflexive) recognition saves the flâneur's soul, in a manner that even Socrates would approve.<sup>114</sup>

Jenks suggests that the flâneur must engage with the crowd, in order to understand the postmodern city. The only means of gaining a proximity to the crowd is to integrate, which entails losing the blasé, aloof attitude of the Parisian dandy. The contemporary flâneur must match the crowd in both pace and in behaviour. Consequently, the divide between the postmodern flâneur and the crowd becomes distinctly blurred.

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<sup>114</sup> Chris Jenks, "Watching Your Step: The History and Practice of the Flâneur," *Visual Culture*, ed. Chris Jenks (London: Routledge, 1995) 153.

## Street as Stage

A way for the flâneur to distinguish between ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’ is for him to develop an understanding of the various performances which are played out repeatedly at street level. In *Low Life*, Luc Sante likens the New York street to a stage:

Manhattan was a theatre from the first. When, early on, it was a walled city, and further surrounded by a forest of masts, it enclosed in its ring a small universe. This enclosure is the model of cities as it is of theatres, as can be seen when one compares old representations of fortress cities and of Greek amphitheatres and later theatres like the Globe. In Manhattan, social stratification followed a course in which the waterfront and the area environs near it became undesirable, became like the galleries, while the dead center, Fifth Avenue, would be the orchestra stalls. What, then, would be the stage? There are two answers. One of them is contained in the image of the city as a theatre, consisting of rings, loge, and parquet, in which there is no stage per se but where the audience is the object of its own contemplation.

Manhattan has eternally been fascinated by itself, its pursuit of its own regard epitomized in hundreds of ways, from the numerous scale representations of the city built in the nineteenth century – E. Porter Belden’s 20-foot-by-24-foot wooden model of 1845-6 was the most impressive – to the fact that Beatniks in the 1950’s would refer to their territory in Villages West and East as the ‘Set’. The other answer has

to do with the street that runs diagonally up the island – Broadway – putting itself on display and carrying in its train its dark twin, the Bowery.<sup>115</sup>

To state that “Manhattan was a theatre from the first” is to immediately equate it with a place of performance, a place of spectatorship. The moment the pedestrian enters the public arena he becomes part of a show. To stroll by the waterfront is to idle in the galleries and to wander down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue is to lounge in the orchestra stalls. The stage itself, as Sante states, is rather more difficult to locate. Sante puts forward two proposals. The first is that “there is no stage per se”, and that the audience is the “object of its own contemplation.” The second locates the stage on Broadway. Nevertheless, Sante fails to pose the question what *type* of theatre is Manhattan most akin to? From a range of theatre types: proscenium, end stage, thrust and so on, it is clear that Manhattan could only be thought of as an arena, or theatre-in-the-round (the most famous of which, incidentally, is the Circle in the Square on Broadway).

Clearly, like a theatre-in-the-round, Manhattan is tiered. Street level is, of course, representative of the stage, and the spectator can direct his gaze streetwards from the ground, first or forty-first floor of the surrounding skyscrapers. Similarly, the spectator can peer across at the ‘audience’ on the other side of the ‘arena’, as they too regard the performance from adjacent high-rise buildings. Yet as in a theatre in the round, the stage is the centre point of activity. After all, how many of us have climbed 1,050 feet to the 102nd floor observatory of the Empire State Building only to look up? We may be startled by the panoramic vista, the fact that on a clear day we can see up to 80 miles, yet our main focus is drawn down by the hubbub in the streets.

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<sup>115</sup> Luc Sante, *Low Life* (New York: Random House, 1992) 71.

An extreme form of theatre in the round is of course the promenade production, whereby there is no separation between the audience space and the acting space. Here the audience is permitted to come close to the actors as they perform. At street level in New York, audience space and acting space merge into one. As Sante states, the audience (or crowd) "is the object of its own contemplation." Stepping onto the street, each pedestrian, 'takes to the stage' thus becoming a performer and, as with the performer, each pedestrian's age, physical appearance (including personal tastes, 'costume', stature and body movements) and social status (again, reflected by costume/demeanour) are subject to scrutiny on the street. Yet simultaneously, the performer also takes his or her place in the audience, scrutinising other 'performers' as they themselves are scrutinised.

Due to the structure of the theatre in the round little can be obscured from the audience. Unlike a proscenium, end stage or thrust where the performer can conceal himself behind scenery, pillars and so forth, the theatre in the round player is left exposed. Moreover, in what we would consider more conventional types of theatre, props are concealed and only revealed to the audience when they are intended to be. On entering a theatre in the round before a performance, it is not unusual to see prop furniture outside of the arena which will later be carried onto the stage. With this particular layout the internal workings of the theatre are laid bare. Nothing can be hidden because there is nowhere to hide.

We would presume then that, given its likeness to the theatre in the round, Manhattan would be similar in its 'transparency'. Yet, on the contrary, although the street is exposed to scrutiny from all sides and from numerous levels, many aspects of street life remain opaque. The main function (or plot) of the street is readable by all. This plot is played out by the three main dramatis personae: shoppers, workers and

tourists. We see a bag-laden woman on the street, a suited man, or a baseball capped, camera toting wanderer and we immediately recognise their role. The three predominant groups of performers intermingle at street level filling the bulk of mise-en-scène. Sub plots subtly played out by the minor characters are far less evident to the casual observer, regardless of the fact that they are performed in the very same arena.

Drug dealers, prostitutes, pimps and pickpockets; Manhattan's criminal element that operate at street level, could all be deemed as minor characters. It is essential that their performance on the street goes unrecognised to all but those they *wish* to reveal it to. The elaborate steps, gestures and poses of the pickpocket's performance are carried out in front of a large audience, yet to most it appears no more than the customary tangling of bodies on any busy street. To read this particular street level sub plot, the spectator requires a certain degree of esoteric knowledge. Moreover, criminality is merely one of many invisible sub-plots which are acted out at street level. In *Body Language*, Julius Fast writes:

On the theme of deviates, among both male homosexuals and lesbians there are definite body language signals that can establish intimate communication. Homosexuals "cruising" on a street can identify a sympathetic soul without exchanging a word... "Making contact is relatively simple," a young homosexual recently explained in a survey. "The first thing to do is to identify your man, and its hard to tell you how its done, because there are so many little signals. Some of it is the way he walks, though many of us walk like perfectly normal men. Mostly, I guess, it's eye contact. You look and you know. He holds your eye just a little too long, and then his eye may travel down your



body. The quick glance to the crotch and away is a sure giveaway...Discussing his own signals, he explains. "I walk past and then look back. If there's any interest he'll look back too. Then I slow down, stop to look at a store window. Then we'll drift back towards each other...and contact!"<sup>116</sup>

The many "little signals" which pass between male homosexuals and lesbians whilst cruising, are for the most part inscrutable to the uneducated observer. It is clear from the above that it is difficult even for those who partake in cruising to describe the exact signs which identify another cruising male. The young man being interviewed suggests that a "sympathetic soul" can sometimes be identified by his walk, yet many gay men walk like straight men. On other occasions a stranger's sexuality can be conveyed merely by the way in which he makes eye contact. The act of cruising, along with Fast's *Body Language* will be discussed in greater detail in chapters three and four with reference to the work of Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke and David Wojnarowicz. The extract from Fast demonstrates the subtle manner in which cruising occurs. As with certain forms of street crime, the performance involved in cruising is readable only by those with knowledge, to the majority of the audience the gay performer remains sexually hidden.

### **Flânerie, Cruising and Queer Theory**

With regards to cruising and the gay walker, issues of performance and identity can be expounded by drawing upon specific areas of queer theory. Tasmin Spargo states that: "queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual

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<sup>116</sup> Julius Fast, *Body Language* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988) 92.

framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire.”<sup>117</sup>

The complexity of the queer debate is exemplified by reactions to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In one of the most significant texts in queer theory, Butler readdresses the discussion of human sexuality presented in Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Butler recognises that Foucault’s work has a distinct bias toward *male* homosexuality. *Gender Trouble* is an attempt to redress the balance by examining and challenging the production of *female* sexuality. The result is a critique of normative models of sexual organisation. Despite Butler’s intentions, her work and most significantly her use of the word ‘queer’ has been subject to severe scrutiny by critics such as Sheila Jeffreys. In her essay “The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians: Sexuality in the Academy,” Jeffreys argues that “the appearance of queer theory and queer studies threatens to mean the disappearance of lesbians.”<sup>118</sup> Jeffreys’ concerns surround the manner in which she believes that the word ‘queer’ relates directly to the white gay male. Consequently, rather than providing a “new and uniquely liberating”<sup>119</sup> approach to gender politics, queer theory perpetuates a distinctly masculine, homosexual bias. Even within the discipline itself, it is clear how the use of the word ‘queer’ has the potential to create significant tension. It is not my intention to utilize queer theory as the driving force of this thesis, neither would it be appropriate to discuss the complexities of the debate in great detail. However, it is clear that elements of queer theory can be used to inform and reinterpret the flâneur’s reading of New York City.

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<sup>117</sup> Tasmin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Cambridge: Icon, 1999) 9.

<sup>118</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, “The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians: Sexuality in the Academy,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 17.5 (1995): 459.

<sup>119</sup> Jeffreys 469.

The use of 'queer', as interpreted in this thesis, positions the 'deviant' in direct opposition to heterosexual normativity and in doing so challenges the political practices which regulate and subjugate alternative identities. For example, in chapter three I examine how O'Hara attempts to 'queer' the street. In essence, O'Hara is attempting to reveal the latent homosexual potential of the street. He does this by skewing conventional heterosexual readings of street life by observing and reassessing the city from the perspective of a gay wanderer. This is an unconventional and potentially controversial approach to the word 'queer'. However, it serves to reveal the manner in which O'Hara challenges the unflinching heterosexuality of the 1950s American city.

### **Redefining the Flâneur**

The primary aim of this chapter was to provide a photo fit of the nineteenth century flâneur. The following chapters examine varying configurations of the wanderer in postwar New York writing. It would be inaccurate to describe these wanderers as flâneurs in the traditional sense. For example, the nineteenth century flâneur was almost without exception a white male; Rufus, discussed in the following chapter, is black, whilst Lila, discussed in chapter five, is female. Similarly, the classic Parisian flâneur belonged to the upper echelons of society, whereas Huncke and Wojnarowicz, discussed in chapter four, are destitute. In terms of class, fortune, race and gender, there is little to connect the wandering French aristocrat with Manhattan's community of postwar outsiders. The aim of this thesis is not to force a direct comparison, but to recognise echoes of the classic flâneur in twentieth century New York literature.

The wanderers examined in the following chapters retain the same basic function as Baudelaire's flâneur: they are deployed at street level as urban analysts.

Further similarities may be tenuous. For instance, O'Hara's motives for wandering are similar to those of the nineteenth century *flâneur* to the extent that he is motivated by the simple pleasure of walking and observing the city. However, whereas the Parisian aristocrat had limitless time to explore at his leisure, O'Hara's walks are conducted during his lunch hour. His walks are therefore more condensed, frantic and often punctuated by an immediate need to shop and to eat. His working life dictates the pace, time span and nature of his wandering. The aristocratic *flâneur* was not bound by the need to work and took great joy in existing almost constantly in the public sphere. Similarly, Huncke and Wojnarowicz have limitless time on the street, but this is on account of their poverty, rather than their wealth. They take on a similar role as perpetual observers, yet their constant presence on the street is unwilling. Chapter four reveals how Manhattan's homeless have no choice but to wander and watch the street, occasionally as a form of entertainment, but primarily as a method of survival.

These examples briefly demonstrate how the urban outsiders described in this thesis share common traits with the nineteenth century Parisian wanderer whilst simultaneously contradicting the key hierarchical, social and economic criteria expected of a traditional *flâneur*. Branding any of the wanderers discussed in the following chapters as '*flâneurs*' in a strictly classical sense is undoubtedly problematic. Rather than stretch the term '*flâneur*' beyond its limitations, a slightly less rigid interpretation is required. It is therefore necessary to recognise echoes of traditional *flânerie* in postwar New York literature, whilst being conscious of the disparities between the nineteenth century European and twentieth century American wanderer. This approach facilitates an important rereading of outsidership and urban space as mediated through the wanderer's gaze.

In this thesis, the definition of the flâneur is pared down to its essential elements. In order to be considered as a potential flâneur, the literary character in question must be an urban wanderer who walks in search of spectacle. He or she must also be an outsider with sufficient critical distance to dissect particular segments of the cityplace. However, there is no longer a need for the character in question to be of a specific gender, sexuality, race, nationality or class. The disadvantage of approaching the flâneur in this manner is that many ties to the original Parisian wanderer are essentially dissolved. It is arguable that this pared down version of the flâneur bears a stronger resemblance to Debord's walking methodologist,<sup>120</sup> discussed earlier in this chapter, rather than the Baudelairean boulevardier. The greater advantage of approaching the New York wanderer specifically as a flâneur is the ability to draw upon the significant body of critical material devoted to flânerie and relate it directly to New York. This process also generates some tension, as not all criticism of the Old World flâneur correlates with, or pertains to, the wanderer in the postwar American metropolis. Nevertheless, I have already demonstrated how, for example, sections of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* not only apply to twentieth century New York, but also encourage a critical rereading of the city. By treating the New York wanderer as a flâneur, the often deceptively passive literary walker is redefined as an incisive social analyst. In turn, the wanderer can be employed to infiltrate and illuminate specific areas of urban life and in terms of this study is a vital tool for inspecting New York's relationship with its decentred identities.

The following study of Kerouac and Baldwin's work examines primarily the flâneur's excavation of 'exotic' urban spaces. Kerouac's exploration of Harlem falls into the wandering tradition of Byron, Privat and Baudelaire before him with regards

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<sup>120</sup> I examine the links between the flâneur and Debord's walking methodologist in greater detail in: Darren Carlaw, "The Twentieth Century Flâneur: Consumer or Critic?," diss., Newcastle U, 2002.

to a fascination with 'otherness'. Baldwin, conversely, creates a series of literary wanderers, one of whom is black and the *object* of white bohemian fascination. The literary flâneur's invisibility, freedom to explore and sense of place was somewhat taken for granted in nineteenth century literature. The *de facto* segregation of Manhattan in the 1950s places the flâneur in a city where invisible racial boundaries restrict movement within the cityplace and unquestioned access beyond these boundaries is dictated by skin colour.

## Chapter 2

“Wishing I were a Negro...”<sup>1</sup> The Bohemian Wanderer in the Ghetto

In 1968 Norman Mailer claimed in his essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” that 1950s America had seen the emergence of “a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action.”<sup>2</sup> In doing so he denies the existence of 19<sup>th</sup> century urban explorers, such as Privat, or for that matter Baudelaire, as discussed in the previous chapter. Both Privat and Baudelaire were clearly precursors to the twentieth century American urban adventurers that Mailer describes in his essay. As their predecessors had identified with the ragpickers, the outcasts of their time, the hipster, or ‘White Negro’, also wanted to ‘identify’ with the most oppressed group in Eisenhower’s America: the African American.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is erroneous to believe that the hipster was the first generation of American bohemian to be drawn to black culture and black urban communities. ‘Slumming’ was invented in 1920s New York. In this particular period it became fashionable for avant-garde bohemians to travel to Harlem to witness at first hand the “brothels, speakeasies, dance halls, sidewalks, corners and stoops” which made up the infrastructure of this marginal zone.<sup>4</sup> For the 1920s bohemian, a taxi ride beyond 125<sup>th</sup> Street into the ‘African jungle’ of the Harlem district symbolized an escape into a primitive, exotic community where the natives were uninhibited, passionate and animalistic. Writers such as Carl Van Vechten and Eugene O’Neil spoke of the white ‘penetration’ into the black slums. In novels such as Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* and *Parties: Scenes from Contemporary New York Life* the divide between the acts of

<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (London: Penguin, 1972) 169.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Flamingo, 1994) 292.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 139.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black White sex districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 144.

flânerie and interracial sexual tourism become distinctly blurred. Van Vechten himself was renowned for frequenting the “transsexual floor shows, sex circuses and marijuana parties<sup>5</sup> along 140<sup>th</sup> Street.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, when we encounter in post-war New York literature “the best minds of [a] generation...dragging themselves through Negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,”<sup>7</sup> we understand that these “angel headed hipsters”<sup>8</sup> were not the first intellectuals to go slumming in the racial/minatorial spaces of New York City. New York may traditionally be a “mosaic of little worlds,”<sup>9</sup> yet in response to this tradition there will always be characters who exist, or at least feel the urge to travel, between these ‘worlds’.

In many respects, the twentieth century bohemian’s ‘touring’ of black urban communities is related directly to 19<sup>th</sup> century bohemian travel to exotic lands. Van Vechten’s uptown journeys to Harlem are comparable to those of Byron to Greece, in so much as the motivation behind both trips was to indulge in the ‘primitive’ sexuality which these territories were said to embody. Meanwhile, zoot-suit wearing, bop-talking, iconic hipsters, such as Neal Cassady, are reminiscent of Flaubert, in the sense that even though they are considered as outsiders by the communities which they visit, they adopt the same modes of dress and language as the natives in an attempt to assimilate.

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<sup>5</sup> In *A Guide to New York’s Strange Sections* (1926), Clement Wood naïvely states that: “There is little immorality connected with it [the white exploration of Harlem]; there is even surprisingly little miscegenation. New York State for years has permitted the marriage of whites and blacks; and these marriages are rare as red cats. Less formal matings are even rarer.” Clement Wood, *A Guide to New York’s Strange Sections* (Kansas: Haldeman-Julius, 1926) 11. Van Vechten clearly had a keener eye for ‘red cats’ than Wood.

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” *Selected Poems 1947-1995* 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl”.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984) 40.



**“The New Yorkers have all turned black”<sup>10</sup>: White tourism in Harlem**

For the hipster, the black communities of New York, such as Harlem, were like another country. It is clear that non-physical boundaries exist between (white) downtown Manhattan and the (black) ghetto. According to James Weldon Johnson the boundaries of Harlem were “marked not only by brick or stone but by the change of colour of the crowds as Seventh Avenue crossed 125<sup>th</sup> Street.”<sup>11</sup> A New York guidebook, published in 1931 confirms this, stating:

If you are walking absent mindedly up Fifth Avenue, and suddenly raise your eyes, you are surprised to notice, in the accustomed frame and low houses with brownstone fronts and door steps, a completely exotic picture. Within a few yards, within a few minutes, the New Yorkers have all turned black.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that the guidebook is aimed only at the *white* urbanite. The above extract locates the boundaries between white and black Manhattan, whilst implicitly warning the “absent-minded” Caucasian pedestrian that once he or she has wandered across these boundaries he or she will enter an ‘exotic’ world, different to his or her own. The extract underlines that “within a few minutes, the New Yorkers have all turned black” implying that once “you” walk into uptown “you” will be the only white pedestrian, which appears to be a threatening prospect.

The white urbanite’s fear of straying into Harlem and similar black populated communities is a theme which has been perpetuated in literature and film throughout the twentieth century. Over five decades after the publication of the New York guidebook in 1931, a similar division between downtown and uptown Manhattan is

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Burroughs, *New York: An Intimate Guide* (New York: Augustin, 1938) 268.

<sup>11</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Harlem the Culture Capital,” *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Athenaeum, 1975) 301-2.

<sup>12</sup> Burroughs 268.

depicted in Martin Amis' novel, *Money*. At the beginning of the novel the protagonist, John Self, refuses to pay his taxi fare:

'Listen to me you fat fuck,' [the taxi driver] began. 'This is Ninety-Ninth and Second. The money. Give me the money.' He said he would drive me uptown twenty blocks and kick me out on the street, right there. He said that by the time the niggers were done, there'd be nothing left of me but a hank of hair and teeth...<sup>13</sup>

On Ninety-Ninth and Second, the white pedestrian is relatively safe, however, if the taxi driver kicks Self out of the cab any further uptown he will be 'ripped to pieces' by the 'natives' because of his whiteness. Again there is an exoticism in the taxi driver's assumption that "by the time the niggers were done, there'd be nothing left of [Self] but hair and teeth". He depicts the African-American as being tribal, almost cannibalistic, and Harlem itself as an untamed, un-policed jungle.

The taxi driver's comments perpetuate a racist white perception of Harlem: that it is 'dirty' and 'dangerous', a projection of evil, a primitive darkness. Due to the fact that the area has been demonised by white society, the passage of white individuals or groups from downtown Manhattan into uptown Harlem is seen as a transgressive activity. If Harlem is a dirty place, the reason for bohemians choosing to frequent its bars and clubs must be to get *themselves* dirty. Indeed, the hipster's motives for venturing into the marginal areas of Manhattan were, in certain respects, similar to those of Van Vechten and his contemporaries: spectacle, interracial sex, drugs and jazz.

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 2000) 3.

## The Ghetto Community

Of course, from a black Harlemit's perspective, uptown is nothing more than home. Illicit behaviour clearly takes place in Harlem; however, rather than sensationalising such activities, African-American authors such as James Baldwin choose to focus upon the sense of community in the ghetto:

The avenue is elsewhere the renowned and elegant Fifth. The area I am describing, which, in today's gang parlance, would be called "the turf", is bounded by Lenox Avenue on the west, the Harlem River, on the east, 135<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, and 130<sup>th</sup> on the south. We never lived beyond these boundaries; this is where we grew up. Walking along 145<sup>th</sup> Street - for example - familiar as it is, and similar, does not have the same impact because I do not know any of the people on the block. But when I turn east on 131<sup>st</sup> and Lenox Avenue, there is first a soda-pop joint, then a shoeshine "parlor", then a grocery store, then a dry-cleaners', then the houses. Along the street there are people who watched me grow up, people who grew up with me, people I watched grow up along with my brothers and sisters; and, sometimes in my arms, sometimes underfoot, sometimes at my shoulder - or on it - their children, a riot, a forest of children, who include my nieces and nephews.<sup>14</sup>

Here Harlem is far from the den of iniquity that it is portrayed to be in white literature. In a sense, this piece by Baldwin is the reverse of those statements made by the 1931 New York guidebook. For Baldwin, walking on the *downtown* stretch of Fifth Avenue is unusual because all of the New Yorkers have 'turned' *white*. He

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<sup>14</sup> James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," *Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998) 170-1.

admits that he has never lived beyond the boundaries of what he refers to as the 'turf'. Consequently, when walking uptown<sup>15</sup> he sees himself as walking home, rather than into an 'exotic' area as described by the New York Guide Book, or a 'savage' area, as described by the taxi driver in Amis's *Money*. When Baldwin turns "east on 131<sup>st</sup> and Lenox" he does not, unlike the author of the guidebook, see a "completely exotic picture," he merely sees the place where he grew up. The Harlem which Baldwin depicts is not one which is made up of "brothels, speakeasies, [and] dance halls," a place where gangs sit menacingly on the stoops of semi-derelict brownstone houses, waiting to victimize any passer-by. Baldwin's Harlem, like any other community, has a "soda-pop joint," a "shoeshine 'parlor'", a "grocery store," and a "dry-cleaners". It is a place where he can mix in the street with the people he has grown up with, a place where the children of his contemporaries play in the streets.

### **Separate Lives: The Downtown/Uptown divide**

The contrast of white and black perceptions of downtown/uptown Manhattan are amplified in the work of Jack Kerouac and James Baldwin. Although Kerouac and Baldwin both wrote during the same period, it is rather uncommon to hear the two authors mentioned in the same breath. This, of course, is not surprising. Although there are only two years of age between Kerouac (born 1922) and Baldwin (born 1924), they have little in common. Kerouac grew up amongst what he describes as

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<sup>15</sup> Baldwin's uptown walk to Harlem on Fifth Avenue would be a fascinating one, passing Museum Mile and the wealthy Upper East Side. Ahead of him would be Mount Morris Park, dissecting the Avenue at 120<sup>th</sup>. The Mount Morris Fire Watchtower (1855), a key landmark of Central Harlem, would become visible as he approached his community. Although obsolete, the New York Fire Department continued to ring the tower's bell for timekeeping purposes, this ceased when the neighbourhood became predominantly black. The park itself changed its name to Marcus Garvey Park in 1973, commemorating the work of the Black Nationalist, in favour of the former Robert Morris (financier of the American Revolution and proposer of a head tax on slaves). Baldwin's walk would also take him past 122<sup>nd</sup> Street or 'Doctor's Row'. An example of the 'gilded ghetto,' this was a row of brownstone houses inhabited by Harlem's black professionals.

“the humble homes of French-Canadian Lowell” Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the homosexual Baldwin was raised in poverty stricken Harlem.

In 1940 Kerouac won an academic scholarship and left Lowell High School for The Horace Mann Prep School in New York. The following year he moved on to Columbia University, in Morningside Heights.<sup>17</sup> Columbia’s main campus, located between 114<sup>th</sup> and 120<sup>th</sup> Streets, was within close proximity of Harlem. Rather unsurprisingly, it was at this point in Kerouac’s life that he began venturing into the jazz clubs of uptown New York. Baldwin, meanwhile, was still living with his family eleven blocks north on 131<sup>st</sup> Street. He had graduated from The De Witt Clinton High School and began commuting to New Jersey where he had found a defence-related job in Belle Mead. As David Leeming states in Baldwin’s biography, “the pay was good, making it no longer necessary to live at home, and on weekends there was the Village, where he was making friends, men and women, some black, some white.”<sup>18</sup>

The following decade proved to be a restless time for both men. Kerouac left Columbia to join the Merchant Marines and served on the S.S. Dorchester during World War II. After the war, he hitchhiked through America, visiting 47 states, and became a factotum taking almost any job he was offered when in need of cash on his travels. Baldwin, conversely, remained in New York City. The draft was also a real possibility for him, although as Leeming argues, “he would probably be deferred, as the oldest male child of a family consisting of a jobless father in ill health, a working

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerrard* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 9.

<sup>17</sup> Morningside Heights has had a long, uncomfortable relationship with residents of West Harlem, not only due to a tradition of white frat boys being pretenders to a ghetto lifestyle. The slow expansion of the campus encroached heavily on residential areas, threatening black communities. Plans to expand northwards to 133<sup>rd</sup> Street continue to be disputed by Manhattanville residents. Timothy Williams, “In West Harlem Land Dispute, It’s Columbia vs. Residents,” *New York Times* 20 Nov. 2006, 9 Nov. 2007 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/20/nyregion/20columbia.html?\\_r=1&ref=nyregion&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/20/nyregion/20columbia.html?_r=1&ref=nyregion&oref=slogin)>.

<sup>18</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: a Biography* (New York: Penguin, 1994) 38.

mother, and eight hungry brothers and sisters.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Leeming does point out that the war had a significant effect on the area in which Baldwin was living:

World War II was already turning Harlem into a true ghetto, a wasteland where white soldiers were forbidden to go, where segregated black soldiers had to go, where commerce was reluctant to go, and where ‘ordinary’ whites chose not to go. Harlem in 1942 was not the artistic center it had been in the “renaissance” of the twenties.

This change in atmosphere convinced Baldwin that if he was to become a successful author, he must escape Harlem. In June 1943, he was fired from his defence job, and returned to the ghetto where he found work meat-packing. He remained in Harlem until the death of his father, just over a month later, when he finally decided that he would move to Greenwich Village.

It was in Greenwich Village that Kerouac and Baldwin’s paths would finally cross. Baldwin stayed in various rooms around the Village, earning his way as a handyman, office boy, factory worker, dishwasher, and waiter. Throughout his travels Kerouac returned frequently to New York and was a regular on the Village ‘scene’. Greenwich Village was, admittedly, a productive environment for both aspiring authors. As Leeming states, “it was a place for talk, art, ideas,”<sup>20</sup> yet most importantly, in the case of Baldwin, “the bohemian villagers seemed less concerned with his being ‘coloured’ than did white people elsewhere.”<sup>21</sup>

Baldwin first met Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg in The White Horse Tavern<sup>22</sup> at the corner of Hudson and 11th Streets on the western edge of Greenwich Village. The

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<sup>19</sup> Leeming 37.

<sup>20</sup> Leeming 37.

<sup>21</sup> Leeming 37-8.

<sup>22</sup> The White Horse Tavern at the corner of Hudson and 11<sup>th</sup> Street opened in 1880 and has subsequently been a resting place for many a New York flâneur. The bar gained notoriety in the 40s and 50s as a bohemian hangout. Dylan Thomas drank himself to death here, expiring at the nearby St.

two men may have eventually come together geographically by chance, yet it appears that there was by no means a meeting of minds. Few details of their encounter have been recorded, however, in correspondence with myself, Leeming, a friend as well as biographer to Baldwin, stated that "he met them only casually and was somewhat amused by their talk."<sup>23</sup> However, it was clear that Baldwin had little in common with Kerouac and the beats. The chapter entitled "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," in *Nobody Knows my Name* (1954) first demonstrated his contempt for the Beat Generation. Here Baldwin makes derogatory references to "Kerouac and all the other Suzuki<sup>24</sup> rhythm boys," from whom, he states, "I expected nothing more than the pabulum-clogged cries of *Kicks! And Holy!* It seemed very clear to me that their glorification of the orgasm was but a way of avoiding all of the terrors of life and love."<sup>25</sup> Baldwin's contempt for the Beats was further displayed when in 1961 he attended a "funeral party" for the Beat Generation. The party, organized by Baldwin's Belgian friend, Robert Cordier, included a mock coffin and a 'funeral march' which took place in the street after the 'celebration'.<sup>26</sup>

### Expansion of the Black Metropolis

Kerouac and Baldwin both chronicle life in Manhattan during the late 1940s and 1950s, a period when the black population in major American cities was seen to double.<sup>27</sup> Although black communities were still paying almost twice as much as whites for comestibles, black employment was on the increase and those living in

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Vincent's Hospital. Graffiti in the restroom read: "KEROUAC GO HOME!" Both Baldwin and Mailer were also known to socialise here.

<sup>23</sup> David Leeming, email from the author, 12<sup>th</sup> Aug 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Baldwin presumably refers to D.T. Suzuki's influence on the Beats. "Rhythm" may be a direct reference to the Beat love of jazz or Suzuki's teaching, "When satori artistically expresses itself, it produces work vibrating with "spiritual (or divine) rhythm" (ki-in), exhibiting myo (or the mysterious) or giving a glimpse of the unfathomable which is yugen." D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Bollingen, 1959) 221.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin, *Collected Essays* 277.

<sup>26</sup> Leeming 183.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Johns, *Moment of Grace: The American City in the 1950s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 72.

Harlem were said to experience a better standard of life than in any other city in the US. Although with the flourishing of the Civil Rights movement slow but steady progress was being made, Michael Johns points out:

American cities were still, as *Newsweek* wrote of New York in 1959, “allergic to color”... The building trades were extremely hostile towards blacks during the '50s... blacks had a hard time getting white-collar jobs, too... black professionals earned less than their white counterparts... so even if the black metropolis was said to have “become a gilded ghetto” in the '50s, to many of its residents it was still “a ghetto all the same”.<sup>28</sup>

New York may have appeared significantly more progressive than southern cities such as Atlanta, however strong prejudices continued to exist. One group who maintained that they were not “allergic” to colour were the Beats, who crossed racial boundaries within the city on a regular basis. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 1959, Dr Martin Luther King spoke before the Youth March for Integrated Schools in Washington. The crowd was made up of high school and college students, the majority of whom would at least be aware of the emergence of Beat culture. King opened his speech by saying:

As I stand here and look out upon the thousands of Negro faces, and the thousands of white faces, intermingled like the waters of a river, I see only one face—the face of the future. Yes, as I gaze upon this great historic assembly, this unprecedented gathering of young people, I cannot help thinking—that a hundred years from now the historians will

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<sup>28</sup> Johns 86.



be calling this not the "beat" generation, but the generation of integration.<sup>29</sup>

King's specific reference to the "beat" generation in the same breath as "integration" is a provocative one. King's speech came less than two years after *On the Road* was published, when America's interest in the Beats and Beat lifestyle was at an all time high. Coinciding with the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement,<sup>30</sup> the novel itself detailed (in part) a cross pollination between bohemian and African American culture. As early as the 1940s, the Beat Generation had 'intermingled' with black artists, writers and musicians in the ghettos and bohemian quarters of America's major cities. As Jon Panish states: "Revolving around Greenwich Village, the New York Beat scene members saw themselves as a new, racially integrated sub-society, apart from both of the racially constituted parts of New York City (i.e. black Harlem and white elsewhere)."<sup>31</sup> It is understandable how King could envision the Beat ideal as a catalyst to further more widespread racial integration. Yet, despite existing in what appeared to the outsider as a "racially integrated sub-society," did the Beats have a conscious involvement in the early Civil Rights Movement?

In an interview with Gary Snyder conducted by James MacKenzie in 1974, Snyder comments on the apolitical nature of the Beats in the 1950s:

We had little confidence in our power to make any long range or significant changes. That was the 50s, you see. It seemed that bleak. So that our choices seemed entirely personal existential lifetime choices

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther King, "Speech Before the Youth March for Integrated Schools," 18 Apr. 1958, transcript, *Peacework Magazine*, 8 May 2007  
<<http://www.peaceworkmagazine.org/pwork/1298/declead4.htm>>.

<sup>30</sup> *On the Road* was first published on September 5, 1957, a month after the founding of the "Southern Christian Leadership Conference" (SCLC) The SCLC would play an integral role in the organisation of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963). Marchers would include James Baldwin and Bob Dylan.

<sup>31</sup> Jon Panish, "Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*: A Study of "Romantic Primitivism"" *MELUS*, 19.3 *Intertextualities* (Fall, 1994): 108.

that there was no guarantee that we would have any audience, or anybody would listen to us; but it was a moral decision, a moral poetic decision.<sup>32</sup>

From Snyder's point of view, the Beats were not striving to effect *any* specific political change upon mainstream society; their creation of a "sub-society" was an attempt to escape, rather than directly challenge, the bleak Cold War culture. Furthermore, Amiri Baraka's reaction to the presumption that areas such as Greenwich Village were unprejudiced, desegregated spaces was that it was "dumb shit."<sup>33</sup> Baldwin supports this view in his depiction of the Villager's negative reaction to interracial relationships in *Another Country*, examined later. With regards to racial integration in the Village, Panish remarks that:

...the hope that the relationships between white and black bohemians were free from America's racist disease was only a hope, only illusion. That is, no matter how much these idealistic young bohemians hoped and imagined that they were beyond racism, the same power relations existed in the Village that existed outside of it.<sup>34</sup>

Examples of these specific power relations are prominent in the work of both Kerouac and Baldwin. Kerouac in particular imagines himself to be beyond racism, depicting the illusion of racial harmony and mutual understanding in his work. However, his representation of African American culture is consistently inaccurate and racist. Panish states that Kerouac was no more progressive than the likes of Carl

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<sup>32</sup> Gary Snyder, "Interview with Gary Snyder conducted by James Mackenzie at the University of North Dakota Writers Conference." *Beat Visions*, ed. Arthur Winfield Knight (New York: Paragon House, 1987) 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones. Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freundlich, 1984) 132

<sup>34</sup> Panish 108.

Van Vechten,<sup>35</sup> who was discussed in the previous chapter with regards to ‘slumming’ in Harlem.

The Beat generation may not have quite gone down in history as “the generation of integration” as Martin Luther King envisioned, but it would be erroneous to ignore their influence on 1960s counterculture, particularly the hippies’ active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the Beats’ ‘apolitical’ stance, it is undeniable that they challenged a segregated cityplace. Kerouac’s work is important because regardless of its intentions or limitations it documents a crossing of racial boundaries, which King astutely recognised as a step toward integration.

### **Crossing the Racial Divide**

Kerouac and Baldwin were more than suitably positioned to comment on the relationship between the white bohemian and the African-American in 1950s Manhattan. Both men had clearly crossed the so-called ‘boundaries’ between white and black, downtown and uptown, on innumerable occasions. Kerouac fits neatly into the long tradition of white Bohemians, such as Byron, Flaubert and later Van Vechten who were spellbound by the lure of the ‘exotic’. Like those bohemians before him Kerouac ‘penetrates’ into an environment which is largely foreign to him with the intention of indulging in its sensual delights. The term ‘penetration’ is an apt way of describing Kerouac’s activities for a number of reasons. The term has obvious phallic connotations, and is a fair reflection of the interracial sexual tourism which takes place in Kerouac’s work. It denotes Kerouac’s (heterosexual/masculine) position as a ‘foreign body’, an intruder, a colonizer. Baldwin’s point of view, meanwhile, is from that of the colonized. He witnesses at first hand the perpetuation of the myth of the “sexuality of Negroes” by white America and the perverse way in which African-

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<sup>35</sup> Panish 108.

Americans are ghettoised, in order to separate them from mainstream society, yet continue to remain the locus of white desires, to the extent that the ghetto becomes a 'sexual playground' for the likes of Kerouac and countless other 'White Negroes'. Baldwin himself explains in "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," that his position as a black male allows him not only to critique white America, but American masculinity itself:

I think that I know something about the American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way that I have been. It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. The relationship, therefore, of a black boy and a white boy is a very complex thing.<sup>36</sup>

Here Baldwin acknowledges the fact that he is 'outside' the circle of what is classed as American (heterosexual) masculinity. His role as an outsider may leave him open to abuse but it also offers him a critical distance from which he can develop an understanding of how American heterosexual masculinity functions. His interpretations of the macho pursuits, performed by bohemian groups such as the hipsters, are therefore not only insightful in terms of race, but also in terms of sexuality.

In *Another Country* Baldwin employs a number of protagonists, one of which is the white Greenwich Village dwelling hipster, Vivaldo. Vivaldo fits easily into the Kerouac mould. Comparable to a number of Kerouac's protagonists, such as Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, Leo Percepied in *The Subterraneans*, or Jack Duluoz in

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<sup>36</sup> James Baldwin, "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St Martins, 1985) 290.

*Desolation Angels*, he is a young, fast living, jazz-loving, Harlem-goer. However, considering Baldwin's position as a black author, it is clear that he has a rather different agenda to that of Kerouac for constructing a white hipster protagonist.

### Queer Bashing

The comparison between the following two extracts, the first of which is from Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* (written in 1953, published in 1958) the second from Baldwin's *Another Country* (written between 1956-61, published in 1962) introduces us to the way in which Baldwin's hipster protagonist has a different function to that of Kerouac's.

One time I roamed through North Beach with the Stanford basketball team, specifically with Red Kelly...the whole team behind us the Garetta brothers besides, he pushed a violinist a queer into a doorway and I pushed another one in, he slugged his, I glared at mine, I was 18...a nannybeater and fresh as a daisy too – now, seeing this past in the scowl and glare and horror and the beat of my brow-pride they [the Subterraneans] wanted nothing to do with me...<sup>37</sup>

'One time,' he said, 'we got into a car and drove over to the Village and we picked up this queer... We drove into this garage, there were seven of us, and we made him go down on all of us and then we beat the piss out of him and took all his money and took his clothes and left him lying on the cement floor.'<sup>38</sup>

In both extracts the protagonists from the respective novels recount (albeit regretfully) their involvement in queer bashing, during their pasts as 'angry young

<sup>37</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (London: Flamingo, 1985) 18.

<sup>38</sup> James Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Penguin, 2001) 115.

men'. Both men describe the way in which they roamed in gangs, Percepied in North Beach<sup>39</sup> (San Francisco), Vivaldo in Greenwich Village, actively searching for 'queers' to assault. Although Kerouac's work does not necessarily condone queer-bashing, he implies that this activity is part of growing up in a male heterosexual group. We are led to believe that Percepied and Red Kelly's attack on the two gay violinists is nothing more than a male bonding session, a way of amplifying their own 'heterosexual' masculinity by exposing the femininity (or weakness) of two 'queers'. The extract from *Another Country* follows in a similar vane, until we learn that in this specific case, the gang make the 'queer', whom they have captured, "go down" on them all before "beating the piss out of him". As with the extract from Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, the men punish individuals because they are gay. However, unlike Kerouac, Baldwin underlines the fact that the men gain sadistic sexual pleasure from this experience. Perversely, they partake in a homosexual activity with their captive, and then "beat the piss" out of *him* for being homosexual.

Here Baldwin complicates relations between dominant (heterosexual) and marginalized (homosexual) groups. The act which Vivaldo's gang force their captive to perform is one which is intended by them to underline their 'heterosexual' dominance. As Vivaldo says, "You had to be a man where I come from, and you had to prove it, prove it all the time."<sup>40</sup> They see their captive as a form of slave: he goes down on his knees before them and has no choice but to let them beat him, which emphasises his weakness in comparison to his captors' mastery. It is clear, nevertheless, that the 'heterosexual' gang *enjoy* the idea of being felled by another

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<sup>39</sup> This incident actually occurred in Greenwich Village when Kerouac was celebrating with his Columbia football team mates. Kerouac changes the location from east to west coast. Lucien Carr recalls that the incident "never left Jack – the violence of it, against someone else. He used to get drunk and say, 'We should never have hit that man with his violin.'" Lucien Carr, qtd. in Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 1999) 295.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 115.

man, thus highlighting their combined hatred of, and desire for, the gay male. In one respect, they wish to punish the homosexual for his 'otherness'. In another they wish to sample the 'exotic' delights of his 'otherness' for themselves. Baldwin exposes the homoerotic drive behind queer bashing which Kerouac<sup>41</sup> fails to admit to in his work.

The manner in which they plan to keep the attack out of the public eye is, in many respects, an acknowledgement of their guilt for having these homosexual desires. Their intentions are clearly sexual, otherwise their attack could have taken place in the street, as with Percepied and Red Kelly. The implication here is that the form of attack in *The Subterraneans*, whilst it is not necessarily socially acceptable, can take place in public, because it is seen as an assertion of heterosexual male dominance. The act which Vivaldo's gang performs causes them to momentarily cross the boundary from heterosexuality into homosexuality. This is, of course, taboo in heterosexual male circles and therefore the act must be a secret one, or otherwise be an admission of their own 'weakness' or 'queerness' to their contemporaries. The beating which takes place after they have forced their captive to "go down" on them is testament to this. The gang punish their captive not simply because he is a homosexual, but because he has aroused homosexual emotions in each of the gang members, causing them to question their masculinity. The beating is an attempt to reaffirm their heterosexuality, by shrugging the incident off as being nothing more than macho 'kicks'.

Baldwin succeeds here in blurring the divisions between heterosexual and homosexual, by suggesting that there are parallels between repressed homoerotic desire and queer bashing. Rather than setting up simple oppositions between the

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<sup>41</sup> Although heavily homophobic, Kerouac's infatuation with Neal Cassady was heavily publicised. In an interview with the *New York Times*, biographer Barry Miles states that: "His sexual image is early *Playboy*... but in reality, he had a lot of boyfriends." Dinitia Smith, "Scholars and Survivors Tatter Kerouac's Self-Portrait," *New York Times* 9 July 1998, 7 Sept. 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

'straight' and 'gay' male as Kerouac does, Baldwin implies that although heterosexual men create a boundary between themselves and their sexual 'other', that this boundary is not necessarily as rigid as it may first appear. In both the Kerouac and Baldwin extracts we encounter groups of heterosexual men who are fascinated by the homosexual, to the extent that they cruise urban areas in search of them. Admittedly, the men set themselves up in violent opposition to the gay men that they ambush. Nevertheless, Baldwin suggests that even this violence can be seen as a form of engagement, an opportunity (or excuse) to 'interact' with society's 'others' without openly becoming one of the 'others' themselves.

The queer-bashing incidents were, of course, from both Percepied and Vivaldo's past. Both men consider themselves to have moved on, they are now hipsters, bohemians, and not only mix with, but *befriend* society's outcasts. In Kerouac's work there is a seamless transition from angry male to benevolent Beat. Frustrated by the rigours of 1950s mainstream society, the American male decides to 'opt-out', to become 'Beat'. The shift is not unlike Flaubert's move to Egypt over one hundred years earlier. Bored by the grey mannered streets, the bohemian searches for the exotic, and finds it at society's margins. Suddenly he finds himself 'relating' to those outcasts, who only a few years ago he would have denigrated for being a 'queer' or a 'nigger'. Yet now, he believes that he has gained an 'understanding' with them because they too have been let down or shunned by mainstream society in the same way in which he has.

### **Depicting the American Hipster**

Baldwin's portrait of the American hipster male and his relationship with society's outcasts is far more complex than that of Kerouac's. Baldwin's marginal position, the fact that he has a different perspective of American masculinity to that of



Kerouac, allows him to reassess hipster activities. As an African-American and as a homosexual, he has not only been victimized but ostracised by white American society. When white Americans such as the hipsters make an about turn and begin to infiltrate the ghetto in search of jazz, 'kicks' and perhaps even friendship with the African-American, it is only natural that some suspicion is to be aroused. Whereas Kerouac somewhat nonchalantly dismisses the hipster's activities as harmless, Baldwin addresses the graver issues raised by black/white heterosexual/homosexual 'integration'. The crudest form of this 'integration' takes place on the streets of the ghetto, in the form of prostitution. Both Kerouac and Baldwin discuss miscegenation in their work or the hipster desire to 'make' a 'Negro'.

In "New York Scenes", Jack Kerouac wanders through Manhattan's marginal areas. He describes the corners of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue,<sup>42</sup> just off Times Square, a district renowned for black prostitution since the early 1900s. He states:

Depends how high you are – assuming you've picked up on one of there corners – say 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, near the great Whelan's drug store, another lonely haunt spot where you can meet people – Negro whores, ladies limping in a Benzedrine psychosis, - Across the street you can see the ruins of New York already started – the Globe Hotel being torn down there, an empty tooth whole on 44<sup>th</sup> street.<sup>43</sup>

The area of Manhattan in which Kerouac walks has the feel of an underdeveloped country, buildings have been torn down and have not been rebuilt and

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<sup>42</sup> This was also the location of the Port Authority Bus Terminal, the starting point for Kerouac's Greyhound Bus journeys across America. The Terminal and its vicinity continued to be a hangout for prostitutes into the 1980s when Wojnarowicz was working as a rent boy. Once dedicated to sex tourism, the intersection is now home to the prestigious Westin New York at Times Square and the E-Walk Complex. The E-Walk Complex is (in part) a virtual reality entertainment venue which recreates old New York. Presumably the prostitutes and pimps that once frequented this location will not feature as part of the digital recreations.

<sup>43</sup> Jack Kerouac, "New York Scenes," *Lonesome Traveler* (London: Flamingo, 1994) 100.

prostitutes ply their trade on the grimy streets. Nevertheless, Kerouac appears to revel in witnessing the detritus of the city to the extent that his trip to the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue could be interpreted as an act of voyeurism. As with Van Vechten, the African-American becomes hypersexualized. Kerouac reduces the 'Negro whore' to a mere object of carnal desire; she becomes, along with Oriental cuisine and Greek liqueur, another item in the long list of exotic delicacies which can be sampled in Manhattan.

Kerouac's desire to meet such characters at this 'lonely haunt spot' are overtly sexual. Regardless of whether he is looking for a sexual encounter, or merely an erotic spectacle, it is clear that he is aroused by the sight of the "Negro whores...limping in a Benzedrine psychosis." In this scenario, Kerouac can be seen as a white sexual predator, preying upon the misfortune of the African-American. The fact that he is cruising this particular area suggests that he is in search of a *black* prostitute. The 'Negro whores' which he encounters are in a pitiful state, offering sex for money whilst left open to victimization by their Benzedrine induced stupor. Nevertheless, their plight is unimportant to Kerouac. He does not care or question why they are on the streets, nor does he show any remorse for the fact that they have to 'make it' with numerous lascivious hipsters such as himself to satisfy their drug addiction. The 'Negro' whores' only importance in the narrative is that they are tantalizingly exotic *black* girls who are sexually available to white men.

#### **Sexual Tourism: Crossing the "Great Gulf"**<sup>44</sup>

Once again, in *Another Country* we draw parallels between Kerouac's (semi)autobiographical protagonists and Vivaldo, who spends "a lot of time in Harlem

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<sup>44</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 69.

running after the whores up there.”<sup>45</sup> In part one of the novel Vivaldo recalls one of his journeys uptown:

One night as a light rain fell, he was walking uptown on Seventh Avenue. He walked very briskly, for it was very late and this section of the avenue was deserted and he was afraid of being stopped by a prowler car. At 116<sup>th</sup> Street he stopped in a bar, deliberately choosing a bar he did not know. Since he did not know the bar he felt an unaccustomed uneasiness and wondered what the faces around him hid. Whatever it was, they hid it very well. They went on drinking and talking to each other and putting coins in the jukebox....The barman, for example, smiled at something Vivaldo said and yet made it clear, as he pushed his drink across the bar, that the width of the bar was but a weak representation of the great gulf fixed between them.<sup>46</sup>

As with Kerouac, Vivaldo’s sole purpose for travelling uptown is to trawl the streets and bars for black prostitutes. Baldwin’s piece is similar to Kerouac’s in the sense that it focuses upon the atmosphere of New York’s ‘no-go’ spaces. As with Kerouac, the protagonist in *Another Country* allows us to wander with him beyond the city’s racial barriers of exclusion. We are shown tableaux of streets and bars, which to the average New Yorker would be out of bounds. For both Kerouac and Vivaldo, there is a deep erotic charge which connects them to the minatorial geography of New York City. Both indulge in the sexual thrill of entering potentially hazardous areas, to view arousing scenes or take part in illicit practices.

However, the Harlem which Vivaldo sees is very different to the one Baldwin talks of in his essay, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem”. This is Harlem

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<sup>45</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 68.

<sup>46</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 68-9.

after dark, through the eyes of a white protagonist. The sense of community is replaced by fear. The cheerful shops, the 'soda-pop joint', the 'shoeshine parlor', 'grocery store' and 'dry-cleaners', are replaced by sleazy 'juke joints'. The streets in which children played are now 'deserted'. Harlem is depicted as a predatory area: apart from the obvious "prowl car", which could pick Vivaldo up at any time, there is the unspoken threat of being a white male walking in a predominantly black area. When entering the bar he is constantly watching the crowd in order to read their behaviour and perhaps most importantly their reaction to his presence as a white hipster

Baldwin, as a black Harlemit, clearly has an understanding of how a character such as Vivaldo would be received in an uptown bar. This, in turn, adds another dimension to his work. Whereas Kerouac does not even attempt to convey the way in which the "Negro whores...limping in a Benzedrine psychosis" feel about him leering at them, Baldwin is in a position to detail the black reaction to his white hipster protagonist who saunters into Harlem looking for interracial sex.

The frosty reception which Vivaldo receives is apparent from the moment he sits down to drink: "The barman, for example, smiled at something Vivaldo had said and yet made it clear, as he pushed the drink across the bar, that the width of the bar was but a weak representation of the great gulf fixed between them." Baldwin underlines here the fact that the so called 'White Negro' cannot walk into Harlem and expect to be accepted or for that matter treated like one of the community. The "great gulf" between Vivaldo and the bartender, between black and white, appears too wide to bridge. The fact that the bartender "pushes the drink across the bar" emphasises that he does not wish to have any proximity with the hipster, he does not wish to make physical contact by handing him the glass.

Baldwin continually emphasises the fact that Vivaldo's 'penetration' into Harlem is unwanted. He is seen as an invader, a foreign body, which the Harlemites do their best to expel. A 'girl' finally does come over to Vivaldo, and they go back to her room around the corner from the bar. Within seconds of their arrival, Vivaldo realises that he has been tricked:

There they were; he had his tie loosened and his trousers off and they had just been about to begin when the door opened and in walked her 'husband'...

The man looked down at him and smiled.

'Where was you thinking of putting that white boy?' [...]

'You goddamn lucky you *didn't* get it in,' he said. 'You'd be a mighty sorry white boy if you had. You wouldn't be putting that white prick in no more black pussy, I can guarantee you that.'

[...] 'What I don't understand' he said with a fearful laziness, 'is why you white boys always come uptown, sniffing around our black girls.

You don't see none of us spooks downtown, sniffing around your white girls' He looked up. 'Do you?'<sup>47</sup>

Vivaldo finds that the girl has lured him back to her room, so that she and her partner can rob him, a scam commonly referred to on the street as the 'badger game'.

One of the most striking aspects of this incident is his assailant's 'segregationist' attitude. Almost every sentence he utters outlines the division between black and white. Vivaldo is immediately singled out as a foreigner in Harlem by the way in which the man refers to him as 'white boy'. We are then offered a series of oppositions: "white prick" / "black pussy", "white boys" / "black girls", "uptown" /

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<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 69-70.

“downtown”. The implication here is that these oppositions should *remain* opposite.

The African-American community do not welcome white sexual tourism: ‘White boys’ should remain ‘downtown’ with ‘white girls’. Vivaldo has clearly broken these rules by coming uptown and ‘sniffing around’ the black girls. His punishment, by the girl’s partner, can almost be seen as an act of guerrilla warfare. The man beats Vivaldo and robs him at knifepoint, but feels that this is a justified method of defending ‘his’ turf and ‘his’ black girls from white infiltrators. His actions send out the message to other hipsters cruising in Harlem for interracial sex: they could well be beaten and robbed, as Vivaldo was, if they try to put their ‘white prick’ in any ‘black pussy’.

In both the Kerouac and the Baldwin extract, we see the world through the eyes of the white protagonist on black ‘turf’. In both cases the protagonist can be seen as a hunter or predator. In the Kerouac extract the power remains in the hands of the white male. The protagonist has the power to leer unchallenged at the weakened ‘Negro whores’ and to select any one of them if he so wishes. With the Baldwin extract, however, the balance of power shifts as predator becomes prey. The manner in which Baldwin inverts situations such as this is particularly fascinating. With Rufus, another of the novel’s protagonists, we are placed in the position of a black destitute Harlemite, who is *preyed upon* by the white sexual ‘tourists’. The shift of perspective here is a significant one. From seeing uptown through the eyes of a white male invader, we experience life as a black male Harlemite whose territory is invaded. Harlem for Rufus is not the exotic jungle that it is for Vivaldo which he can enter and leave at will; it is the ghetto into which he was born and in which he must now survive.

In the following extract, rather than experiencing the titillation of the 'white hunter' who cruises black communities, we experience the fear and repulsion which is felt by his target:

...the hunters were there, far more assured and patient than their prey. In any of the world's cities, on a winter night, a boy can be bought for the price of a beer and the promise of warm blankets...Something in [Rufus] knew what was about to happen; something in him died in the freezing second before the man walked over to him and said: 'It's cold out here. Wouldn't you like to come in and have a drink with me?'" <sup>48</sup>

The 'hunter' metaphor persists: Rufus is prey. His situation is similar to that of the 'Negro whores' in Kerouac's "Lonesome Traveller", as he too is on the streets having to sell his body. However, in terms of 1950s America, the fact that Rufus is a *male*, "peddling his arse"<sup>49</sup> on the streets, makes his predicament all the more shocking. With Kerouac, the aggressive male protagonist has complete control. He 'penetrates' racial boundaries, both geographically and sexually. Yet Rufus is a male who has no control. He has no power to stop the white 'hunters' entering his neighbourhood. Moreover, he has no power to stop them preying upon him. If he is to survive, to keep warm, to eat, he must concede to their advances in return for food, drink or a blanket. In this instance, the male, the archetypal violator, becomes the violated.

### **Power Relations**

Rufus' lack of power is, of course, related to his race. The white protagonist has the freedom to go wherever he desires, whereas Rufus' movement is restricted. When Baldwin first considered writing *Another Country* the Harlem ghetto was only a

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<sup>48</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 50.

mere fifty years old.<sup>50</sup> Through his own experiences at Belle Mead, Baldwin recognized that even in the 1950s it was difficult for a Harlemit to live or work outside of the ghetto without being subject to vicious racial abuse. The African-American appeared to be confined to the poverty stricken area into which the white-man had pushed him. However, prior to his breakdown and subsequent time on the streets, Rufus attempts to escape the ghetto by frequenting, as Baldwin did, New York's most 'liberal' area, Greenwich Village.

Again we experience the manner in which Baldwin inverts situations; in this instance, a black protagonist attempts to enter into a white world and have a relationship with a white girlfriend. Sadly, Rufus is met with a similar hostility to that which Vivaldo experienced while in Harlem. Rather ironically, Rufus meets Leona in a Harlem jazz club in which he is playing. Baldwin states that "All kinds of people had been there that night, white and black, high and low, people who came for the music and people who spend their lives in these joints for other reasons."<sup>51</sup> Regardless of whether Leona is touring Harlem for the music, or indeed for more dubious purposes, it is clear that she has been drawn to the area due to its notional exoticism. After arriving in New York from the southern states, Harlem is her first port of call. When asked by Rufus, "What were you doing in that club all by yourself Leona?" Leona replies, "I don't know. I just wanted to see Harlem and so I went up there tonight to look around. And I just happened to pass that club and I heard the music and I went in and I stayed. I liked the music...Is that all right?"<sup>52</sup> Leona, in many respects, falls into a similar category as Kerouac's male protagonists, in the sense that

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<sup>50</sup> A number of factors led to a black community being formed in Harlem. Alongside deteriorating housing conditions, the Tenderloin race riots of 1900 forced the African-Americans to move northward out of the downtown area known as 'Black Bohemia.' Phillip Payton's Afro-American Realty Company attracted black families to the area following a turn of the century housing crash and subsequent lack of white tenants.

<sup>51</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 18.

<sup>52</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 22.



there is a relationship between jazz and sexual appetite. The two words appear to be almost interchangeable for the white tourist in Harlem. As a consequence of this, Rufus is highly suspicious of her motives for entering the club. His mode of questioning implies that she is, like Vivaldo, in search of interracial sexual activity, as well as jazz. Leona dismisses this yet it becomes clear, given her past in the segregationist southern states, that interracial relationships are even more taboo for her than they are for the New Yorker, and therefore even more appealing.

**“The Place of Liberation”<sup>53</sup>: Racial divide in Greenwich Village**

Rufus’ subsequent relationship with Leona draws him downtown to Greenwich Village where he hopes that he and his white girlfriend will be accepted. Whilst walking in the streets with his newly found girlfriend and his friend Vivaldo, Rufus finds that this is far from the case:

They encountered the big world when they went into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; Rufus realised that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy...A young couple came towards them, carrying the Sunday papers...the man and the woman looked swiftly from Vivaldo to Rufus to decide which one was [Leona’s] lover. And since this was the Village – the place of liberation – Rufus guessed, from the swift, nearly sheepish glance the man gave them as they passed, that he has decided that Rufus and Leona formed the couple. The face of his wife, however, simply closed tight, like a gate.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 36.

<sup>54</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 36-7.

When Rufus steps out onto the Village streets with Leona the couple are immediately judged by passers-by. Even in the Village, which Baldwin ironically states is “the place of liberation,” Rufus has very little freedom. Admittedly, he does not suffer the same racist remarks here which would be thrown at him and Leona if they were a mixed race couple walking in other districts of New York. Nevertheless, the crowd stare at them disapprovingly and this in turn is a catalyst to Rufus’ breakdown.

Rufus and Leona’s reception in the Village reveals a great deal with regard to the relationship between bohemians and African-Americans. Due to the fact that they are buying their Sunday papers in the Village, we presume that the couple who stare at Rufus and Leona as they pass are representative of the liberal bohemian intellectuals who inhabited the area during the 1950s. As discussed earlier, bohemians such as these had strong links with African American culture, the Village being home to a significant number of jazz clubs where black artists played. Yet Baldwin implies that the Villager finds it acceptable to listen to black jazz music, to go to black run jazz bars – even to go uptown on an evening and make it with the ‘Negroes’ – however, it is unacceptable to have a loving relationship with an African-American. This is emphasised by the way in which the young woman’s face “closed tight, like a gate,” after realising that Rufus and Leona are a couple. The idea here is that she is not ‘open’ to accept this form of interracial relationship. It appears that sexual intercourse between a bohemian and an African-American for ‘kicks’ under the cover of darkness is acceptable, but the sight of a white girl walking hand in hand with a black man, on a *Sunday* morning, is deplorable. This evidence, in turn, suggests that the twentieth century New York bohemian is parasitic in nature. Like Byron, Flaubert, Privat, Baudelaire and many others before him, the Villager indulges in the culture of repressed or impoverished people, whilst not having to experience the repression

and/or poverty for him or herself. White protagonists such as those featured in Kerouac's works, or for that matter Vivaldo in *Another Country*, can go to Harlem, have their fun and then withdraw back into an affluent white society. Characters such as Rufus, however, have no choice but to remain in poverty in the ghetto. Escape, even to Greenwich Village, appears to be out of the question. The bohemians who idolize him when he 'blows' for them in their jazz clubs, will not accept him walking hand in hand with a white partner.

On first examination, it appears then that there is little to differentiate Kerouac's protagonists and Baldwin's Vivaldo from Van Vechten and his slumming avant-garde bohemian contemporaries of the 1920s. Judging by Baldwin's assertions, the 1950s hipster also had little regard for the plight of the African-American other than as an 'entertainer'. However, on closer inspection the hipster's relationship with the black community proves to be rather more complex.

### **"Wishing I were a Negro"<sup>55</sup>: Kerouac's Exploration of the Ghetto**

This parasitic element of Kerouac's relationship with African Americans is revealed in *On the Road* when the protagonist Paradise discusses walking in the 'colored section' of the city:

I walked...in the colored section wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night...All my life I'd had white ambitions...I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes; soft voices were there, occasionally the dusky knee

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<sup>55</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (London: Penguin, 1972) 169.

of some mysterious sensuous gal; and dark faces of the men behind  
 rose arbours. Little children sat like sages in ancient rocking chairs.<sup>56</sup>

Somewhat ironically, Paradise is drawn to the 'colored section' as it appears to offer him so much more 'freedom' than the white neighbourhoods within the city. For Paradise, white America is a controlled, lifeless environment, dominated by the protestant work ethic, consumerism and founded upon the stable family unit. Black America, on the other hand, is seen as uninhibited, vivacious, sexually charged, a sensory delight. In many respects, Kerouac's utopian vision of the city's 'colored section' echoes Van Vechten's depiction of Harlem as an 'African jungle', a primitive escape. Like Van Vechten, he does not consider the poverty which lies behind this 'quaint' scene. Kerouac does not have to experience the hardship involved in living in the area, in being an African-American in a white dominated society. He has the freedom to indulge in the spectacle provided by the ghetto and then leave. The 'Negroes' he describes have no choice but to stay.

In "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," Baldwin targets the offensiveness of this very extract, which he introduces as Kerouac "ruminating on what I take to be the garden of Eden":

This is absolute nonsense, of course, objectively considered, and offensive at that: I would hate to be in Kerouac's shoes if he should ever be mad enough to read this aloud from the stage of Harlem's Apollo Theatre. And yet there is real pain in it, and real loss, however thin; and it is thin, like soup too long diluted; thin because it does not

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<sup>56</sup> Kerouac, *On The Road* 169.

refer to reality, but to a dream. Compare it at random with any old blues.<sup>57</sup>

Baldwin underlines that Kerouac's work would not be accepted by a black audience, that it is a quixotic vision of a black community, as stated previously, without a developed understanding of the poverty or hardship. This extract raises a number of issues with regard to Kerouac and the hipsters. It first of all underlines the fact that Kerouac is attempting to write in the style of a black author, to replicate the pain embodied in blues music. This, in certain respects, correlates with the parasitic nature of the bohemian, by the manner in which he enters countries/territories which are foreign to him, and 'borrows' their cultures to use as his own. Interestingly, Baldwin does admit that there is some "real pain in it," but this pain is only a diluted version of that which is contained in "any old blues." The question is where does this pain emanate from?

Arguably, this pain emanates in part from the poverty of *white* American life. The term 'poverty' does not necessarily refer to economic poverty here, but rather to cultural poverty: the fact that white American life in the 1950s was culturally lacking *something*. Kerouac would argue that being marginal figures themselves, the hipsters felt an empathy for the plight of the African-American community. Like the African-American, the hipster did not feel at home in white American society. Characters such as Kerouac rejected white mainstream. The feeling that, as Baldwin puts it, "the world had prepared no place for you"<sup>58</sup> is perhaps one pain that the hipster perceived himself to share with the African-American. Nevertheless, the bohemian's willed withdrawal

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<sup>57</sup> Baldwin, "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," 278.

<sup>58</sup> Baldwin, "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," 279.

from mainstream society by no means parallels that of the African-American's unwilling segregation, as Baldwin goes on to discuss:

To become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along. This had to be done in the not-at-all metaphorical teeth of the world's determination to destroy you. The world had prepared no place for you, and if the world had its way, no place would ever exist. Now, this is true for everyone, but, in the case of the Negro, this truth is absolutely naked: if he deludes himself about it he will die. This is not the way this truth presents itself to white men, who believe the world is theirs and who, albeit unconsciously, expect the world to help them in the achievement of their identity.<sup>59</sup>

Baldwin outlines that in some form or another, everyone experiences feelings that the world has prepared no place for them. Yet, he points out that the African-American's situation is largely different to that of the Caucasian because he or she has to face a perpetual physical threat on account of his or her colour. It is arguable then, that the bohemian can understand, to an extent, the African Americans feelings of dislocation, but he can never truly understand what it is to be threatened daily by the "not-at-all metaphorical teeth of the world's determination to destroy you." As with the African-American, the bohemian lives on the margins of society; however, unlike the African-American, he is there through his own choice. The word 'choice' is key here. A white citizen is in a position to choose where he places himself in relation to mainstream society. He can conform and be accepted by mainstream society by following a nine to five job and blending in with all of the other white or blue collar workers, or he can reject the mainstream, as the bohemian does, and exist on the

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<sup>59</sup> Baldwin, "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," 279.

margins of society. The African-American, conversely, is born marginalized. He cannot become accepted as part of the mainstream in 1950s America due to his colour. In the following extract Le Roi Jones / Amiri Baraka discusses the bohemian's 'conscious non-conformity' with regard to his relationship with the 'Negro':

Certainly a white man wearing a zoot suit or talking bop talk cannot enter the mainstream of American society....His behavior is indicative on most levels of a conscious non-conformity to important requirements of the society (though the poor white boy in a really integrated neighborhood might pick up these elements of Negro culture as social graces within the immediate group)....the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with the Negro music identified the Negro with the separation, this non-conformity, though, of course, the Negro had no choice.<sup>60</sup>

The hipster's participation in black culture is, as Baraka states, clearly a conscious act of non-conformity. His clothes, language (spoken and written) and musical tastes all symbolize a willingness to break from the mainstream. They are, in essence, an effort to 'become' black due to the fact that the 'white world,' as Kerouac puts it, has not offered the hipster enough 'ecstasy'. The hipster's 'rational' empathy with the black American can be perceived as being racist in many respects. Although the hipsters took on certain characteristics of the black American, the zoot suits, the bop talk, they could never truly understand what it was to be black. Baraka comments that a poor white boy who lives in an 'integrated' neighbourhood may pick up certain elements of black culture. This appears to be a natural appropriation of foreign

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<sup>60</sup> Le Roi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow, 1963) 187.

culture, which comes from constant exposure to it from an early age. Yet, this is by no means the case for Kerouac, who grew up in predominantly white Lowell. Kerouac's hipster bop-talk is something which has been consciously appropriated from the African-American for his own use.

The hipster appropriation of black fashion, music and language is undoubtedly an act of non-conformity. As with Byron and Flaubert before them, going to Harlem and trying to 'become' one of the natives gives them the critical distance to assess and rebel against the world from which they came. Yet, as with the 19<sup>th</sup> century bohemians, the hipsters also fall into the trap of misrepresenting the territories and inhabitants of those territories which allow them to have critical distance. We discover with the bohemian author that there is an intense focus upon his or her own personal development which allows only for a rather myopic representation of the ethnic communities which surround them. As with Greece for Byron, or Egypt for Flaubert, black communities within the American metropolis are described by Kerouac as places of exile for individuals who wish to escape from white/western/mainstream society. Yet, as Baldwin states, Kerouac's depiction of black communities is not based on reality, it is a romanticised dream, founded upon the white mythology of the noble savage and primitive sexuality.

Kerouac's racism is exposed when his work is compared to that of Baldwin. Baldwin presents to us the duality of the black neighbourhood; as a dangerous sexual jungle through the eyes of his white protagonist, Vivaldo, but also as a poverty stricken space, with an intense sense of community through the eyes of his black protagonists. Through his work we understand how the African-American is seen as 'other' by white 1950s American society, but we also learn that beyond the racial and cultural boundaries, white and black communities have a great deal in common right



down to trivialities such as shoeshine parlours, grocery stores and children playing in the streets. The fact that Baldwin mentions these aspects of Harlem may at first appear mundane. Their function is, however, to debunk the theory that Harlem is a dark and dangerous place, a land of dark alleys, seedy juke joints, marauding gangs and syphilitic whores. Baldwin presents to us Harlem by daylight, a poor, yet closely knit community like many other white communities in the New York area. Kerouac, conversely, chooses to perpetuate the African-American's 'otherness'. Admittedly, this could be due to the fact that he does not and cannot understand what it is to have Harlem as a home, rather than a sexual stomping ground. Yet, arguably, Kerouac's motives for accentuating the African-American community's diversities, rather than its similarities, are slightly more complex than this.

In *Outlaw Culture*, bell hooks sheds some light on the reasons behind an author such as Kerouac representing black communities as he does:

Black bodies, then, are like clay – there to be shaped so that they become anything that the white man wants them to be. They become the embodiment of his desires. The paradigm mirrors that of colonialism. It offers a romanticized image of the white colonizer moving into black territory, occupying it, possessing it in a way that affirms his identity.<sup>61</sup>

To use similar words to those of hooks, Kerouac makes black bodies "the site of political and cultural 'radicalism' without having to respect those bodies." To elucidate this point we have to look no further than Kerouac's 'Negro whores'. These characters are prime examples of white racist/sexist stereotypes of black women. As hooks puts it "...white...mass media representations teach us, scratch the surface of

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<sup>61</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation* (London: Routledge, 1994) 56.

any black woman's sexuality and you find a ho – someone who is sexually available, apparently indiscriminate, who is incapable of commitment, someone who is likely to seduce and betray.”<sup>62</sup> We learn, of course, from the likes of Baldwin, that this representation of the African-American female is highly erroneous. We could never place characters such as Ida, in *Another Country*, into this category. Yet we learn, that in order to fulfil the white author's criteria, the black woman cannot be represented as Ida is, as a loving sister. The black woman must be moulded almost into a demonic succubus in order to intensify the transgressive qualities of the relationship between white hipster male and black female.

In reaction to 1950s America, which has more impact? The admission by the hipster that he goes uptown and makes love to his black girlfriend, or that he goes into the ghetto and ‘fucks’? Both admissions are, of course, shocking to the white bourgeois readership of Eisenhower's America, where interracial relationships were considered largely taboo. However, what could be more reactionary against a white segregationist society which encouraged the stable family unit, than the idea that a white man is having an ‘unhealthy’ relationship based solely on sex with a promiscuous black woman in the dirtiest part of town? It is essential then that the black woman is moulded into a ‘ho’, the opposite of the devoted white female homemaker. Similarly, black communities themselves must be portrayed as sleazy and sinful. If Kerouac wrote in the same way in which Baldwin does, depicting it as a neighbourhood like any other with children playing in the streets, the transgressive act of entering these areas would be somewhat diluted.

As hooks states, “the romanticized image of the white colonizer moving into black territory, occupying it, possessing it in a way that affirms his identity.” In

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<sup>62</sup> hooks 56.

Kerouac's case it affirms his reactionary status against mainstream society and all of its trappings. He uses black bodies, music and language to underline his own political and cultural radicalism. Yet, hooks believes that an author such as Kerouac lacks respect for black culture. Not only does he turn black women into whores, and appropriate black language, he somewhat revels in the existence of the ghetto itself.

In *Another Country* the narrator comments on the fact that Vivaldo was just a "poor white boy in trouble and it was not in the least original of him to come running to the niggers."<sup>63</sup> The fact is that the existence of the ghetto gives the hipster such as Vivaldo and Kerouac a place to escape from mainstream white society. If the ghetto ceased to exist, and the African-American was fully accepted into society, the hipster would no longer have an exit strategy. In this light, by celebrating African-American culture in the way in which he does, Kerouac is also celebrating the African-American's poverty and unwilling separateness, as it is these two factors which led to the creation of the ghetto. If the African-American was allowed to develop any economic power, the poverty stricken 'colored sections' which Kerouac considers 'quaint' would cease to exist.

### **The Beat Instrumentalization of Black Communities**

In "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness,"<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Eburne examines the Beats' physical implementation of Cold War critic Lionel Trilling's complex concept of 'Reality'. Trilling's *Reality in America* is a reaction against the politics of conformity, championing the transcendental power of the imagination. 'Reality' is an opportunity for the individual to step beyond the prescribed mass experience, thus destabilizing cultural ideas of normality: it is a form of psychological guerrilla warfare. Eburne argues that the Beats

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<sup>63</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 136.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Eburne, "Trafficking in the Void: Burroughs, Kerouac, and the Consumption of Otherness," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43.1 (1997): 53-92.

expand 'reality' "from the mind to the body"<sup>65</sup> and recognises New York as an important psychogeographical network:

Thrown into the context of post-war New York City, what this "reality" came to represent was not simply a deviance from standard cultural formations but a "discovery" of an American racial, ethnic and cultural underclass who lived in a manner very much at odds with mainstream culture.<sup>66</sup>

The city forges a link between a purely psychological and physical 'troubling' of societal norms. Building upon Eburne's argument, wandering clearly plays an intrinsic role in the Beat urban excavation of New York's racial, ethnic and cultural underclass. The flâneur's movement troubles politically imposed boundaries within the cityplace. The grid silently imposes a sense of place upon each Manhattanite, clustering inhabitants according to wealth, ethnicity and sexuality. The flâneur disrupts this order by forging cross boundary allegiances. With regards to the Beats, these potentially subversive allegiances were formed predominately in the ghetto. The Beat wanderer crossed urban boundaries in search of what Eburne refers to as their "secret heroes"<sup>67</sup>: namely black jazz musicians. The Beat adoption of "secret heroes" will be addressed later in relation to jazz, 'passing' and performance.

It is important at this point to recognize how the flâneur's movement both transcends the 'ideological constraints' of the Cold War cityplace and is a *physical* step beyond what Eburne calls "normal (mass) experience."<sup>68</sup> Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, examined in the following chapter, to a degree document what could be considered 'normal (mass) experience'. O'Hara's movements are contained within

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<sup>65</sup> Eburne 68.

<sup>66</sup> Eburne 68-9.

<sup>67</sup> Eburne 68.

<sup>68</sup> Eburne 66.

Midtown; he is a consumer; he does not cross or attempt to cross boundaries. It would be ludicrous to consider his lunchtime walks a threat to the National Security State. It is those who break from containment who are considered a threat.

The city becomes a zoned space to prevent the spread of 'pollution'. Areas such as Midtown can be seen as 'healthy', as far as the National Security State is concerned: productive, affluent and populated predominantly by white American middle and upper classes. In this model, the internal threat to the National Security State is located within the ghettos and skid rows of Manhattan. This is where the amorphous threat of 'otherness' lies: the home of the 'alien', the 'unhealthy', the 'polluted'. 'Healthy' areas such as Midtown are policed in order to stem the spread of pollution. The Beat flâneur's movement back and forth between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' areas of the city designates him as a potential carrier of 'disease'. He fraternises with those who pose an internal threat to national security at the margins of society. The danger he poses is the potential to infect the 'healthy' mainstream upon his return. Eburne draws specific attention to how the White Negro "fulfils the role of the spectre plaguing the National Security State: psychopath sexual deviant, juvenile delinquent, drug user."<sup>69</sup> The White Negro is a convenient target; by defining all forms of wandering as potentially psychopathic the state can justify its intensive surveillance and policing.

Despite the urban wanderer's potential to 'trouble' or indeed transcend urban constraints, it is necessary to differentiate between intentional acts of political activism and blind hedonism. Was the Beat explorer or the White Negro entering the ghetto consciously intent upon challenging Cold War politics, or was his allegiance with members of Manhattan's black community based upon a selfish desire to fulfil a

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<sup>69</sup> Eburne 69-70.

spectrum of hedonistic drives? It is important to interrogate the racial implications of the Beat desire to transcend socio-political constraints and reject the mainstream via an alignment with the black community. Eburne writes:

For Mailer, the "White Negro" represents not merely a *racial* cross-identification but a whole reconfiguration of a "new white man" as a sort of bomb-era Nietzschean Dionysus, whereby, in Toni Morrison's words, onto the trope of blackness is transferred "the power of illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire."<sup>70</sup>

In binding himself to the African American community the hipster is seen to embrace not only 'blackness', but all aspects of culture considered as marginal or 'other'. For the White Negro, 'blackness' is merely a stereotyped racist symbol (as Morrison emphasises) representative of exoticism, danger, outsidership and outlaw culture. The emergence of the 'White Negro' as a "new white man," is reflective of the bohemian ennui regarding Cold War society, rather than a genuine interest in the plight of the African American. Joe Panish describes this phenomenon as "cultural primitivism":

That is, in times when people are discontented with the progress of their society, these so-called civilized people look to the "other" -- usually a Noble Savage -- as a remedy for their dissatisfaction. The civilized people, in other words, endow a symbol with those characteristics that are opposite to those that their society champions. The white writers of the 1950s, then (like such earlier ones as Van Vechten in *Nigger Heaven* or Sherwood Anderson in *Dark Laughter*), do not see the "other" (in this case, mostly African Americans) for

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<sup>70</sup> Eburne 71.

what he or she is -- a person just like any other who is involved in the complex relations of his or her culture -- but as a static, unreal image.<sup>71</sup>

The distortion of the image of the 'other' by the Beats in particular signifies a lack of understanding. As Kenneth Rexroth pointed out in his criticism of Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*: "The story is all about jazz and Negroes. Now there are two things Jack knows nothing about -- jazz and Negroes."<sup>72</sup> This suggests that despite Kerouac spending a significant amount of time in black communities, his knowledge of African American culture remained limited. Arguably, he is unable to see anything beyond the distorted image of blackness which white bohemia projected upon African Americans. The power of this albeit unreal image is present throughout Kerouac's work:

They ate voraciously as Dean, sandwich in hand, stood bowed and jumping before the big phonograph, listening to a wild bop record I had just bought called "The Hunt," with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray blowing their tops before a screaming audience that gave the record fantastic frenzied volume... The madness of Dean had bloomed into a weird flower.<sup>73</sup>

The phonograph record entitled "The Hunt," which Sal purchases, evokes images of a primitive existence and The Noble Savage. "The Hunt" itself has an intentional physicality, mimicking an exchange between two fighters. The words used by Morrison to describe the "trope of blackness," are echoed in this passage from *On the Road*, where Sal and Dean appear empowered by the mere sound of jazz. Kerouac focuses upon primitive, instinctual drives; Dean's 'bowed' stance whilst jumping

<sup>71</sup> Panish 109.

<sup>72</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Penguin, 1986) 568.

<sup>73</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 113.

offers a bizarre caricature of prehistoric man. He eats 'voraciously' and succumbs to the 'madness' of the 'wild' record with its 'frenzied' volume. Kerouac describes the phenomenon almost as though it were an act of rapid osmosis. Dean absorbs 'blackness' through his exposure to jazz, which in turn is a catalyst for his madness to 'bloom' into a "weird flower". This image alone showcases Kerouac's fascination with the exotic. The "weird flower" is a symbol of 'foreignness' or 'otherness'. The fact that it is "weird" suggests that it is neither recognisable nor indigenous. As the 'White Negro' emerges as a "new white man," Dean's madness also becomes 'weird,' 'strange' and consequently 'desirable' as a result of his own 'connection' with black culture. There are many examples of the Beat desire to be exotic against the backdrop of a conformist Cold War society. However, with specific regards to cultural primitivism and the flâneur, it is fascinating to examine the *literal* act of not seeing the "other" for what he or she is at ground level.

Whilst walking through the ghetto Kerouac romanticises and exoticizes poverty, as examined earlier. Although he attempts to understand and assimilate with those living in the ghetto, it is clear that he is separate in terms of race, experience and privilege. "Wishing I were a Negro,"<sup>74</sup> demonstrates his awareness of his difference. However, when entering the jazz bar his awareness of his own difference appears to diminish. A key example of this would be Kerouac's famous depiction of a jazz concert from *On the Road*, where Sal and Dean become part of the performance. Kerouac depicts a scene of racial and rhythmic union: a complete understanding between performer and crowd, which transcends racial and cultural boundaries. Despite his presumption that he 'understands' jazz, and though this understanding holds a wider knowledge of African American culture, he does not see the performers

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<sup>74</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 169.



for what they are. Kerouac's racist distortion of the performance transforms the jazz musicians and crowd into participants in a form of tribal ritual. Primitive noises punctuate his writing, in an attempt to mimic the sounds of the tenorman's horn: "EE-YAH! EE-YAH! EE-YAH!...EE-de-lee-yah."<sup>75</sup> The sounds appear somewhat simian, more appropriate to the jungle than a sophisticated jazz improvisation. The noises are accompanied by "the rolling crash of butt-scarred drums hammered by a big brutal Negro with a bullneck who didn't give a damn about anything but punishing his busted tubs, crash, rattle-ti-boom, crash."<sup>76</sup> Kerouac focuses on the black drummer's physicality rather than his skill as a jazz musician. His description bears a strong resemblance to Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo, a Study of the Negro Race" (1914) which also uses syncopated early jazz rhythms:

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,  
Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,  
Sagged and reeled and pounded on the  
table,  
Pounded on the table,  
Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a  
broom,  
Hard as they were able,  
Boom, boom, Boom...<sup>77</sup>

Like Lindsay before him, Kerouac draws on the racial stereotype of a threatening, muscular "brutal Negro," whose only interest is 'punishing' his 'tubs'. Kerouac's animalistic "bullneck" corresponds with Lindsay's "bucks". The drums which

<sup>75</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 185.

<sup>76</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 185.

<sup>77</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "The Congo, (A Study of the Negro Race)," *The Daniel Jazz and Other Poems* (London: G. Bell, 1920) 41.

Kerouac hears are 'jungle drums' played with a primitive aggression and fervour. Although forty-three years separate the publication of "The Congo" and *On the Road*, Kerouac's work appears no more progressive, continuing to focus on 'primitive' rhythm and black physicality.

Similarly, Kerouac sees a "six-foot skinny Negro woman...rolling her bones at the man's hornbell, and he jabbed it at her...."<sup>78</sup> The tenorman's actions are reduced to what resembles a spear thrust. The action is eroticised by the male's phallic 'jab', juxtaposed with the female's 'rolling'. The themes of exotic sexuality and violent threat are dominant throughout Kerouac's description. The audience 'roars' and 'groans', the drummer wields "murderous sticks,"<sup>79</sup> and the pianist "pounds" with "spread-eagled fingers."<sup>80</sup> As Panish points out: "[In Kerouac's writing] jazz creativity is portrayed as an almost totally intuitive process driven by feelings, with little education or training required of the black musicians."<sup>81</sup> He is blind to the black musicians' artistry, all he sees is a pseudo-tribal display of 'wild' musical, physical and sexual abandon.

Kerouac then focuses on the hipsters' reaction to the music. Dean mimics the "skinny Negro woman" by standing directly in front of the tenorman: "his face lowered to the bell of the horn...Dean was in a trance. The tenorman's eyes were fixed straight on him: he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was...."<sup>82</sup> Dean's trance like state again evokes images of tribal man where the tenorman is metamorphosised into a witch doctor and his music becomes a form of black magic.

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<sup>78</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 186.

<sup>79</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 186.

<sup>80</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 186.

<sup>81</sup> Panish 107.

<sup>82</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 186.

It is questionable as to whether the tenorman's reaction to Dean, a "long quivering crazy laugh"<sup>83</sup> into his horn, is one of appreciation or ridicule. In Le Roi Jones' play *Dutchman*, the principal character Clay comments on the hipster's adoration of the black jazz musician.

Charlie Parker? Charlie Parker. All the hip white boys scream for Bird. And Bird saying, 'Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass.' And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would've played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note!<sup>84</sup>

Clay, a black New Yorker riding the subway, contemplates Parker's contempt for the hipster's effete screams. The speech itself discusses the potential that all black art is created out of a hatred for white society. Clay argues that if Parker had killed ten white people on Manhattan's wealthy Upper East Side,<sup>85</sup> he would not have felt the same need to vent his anger and pain through his music. Kerouac depicts Dean and the tenorman as being locked in mutual adoration. To the hipster, Dean is the epitome of 'cool' yet from a black perspective he is potentially a ridiculous spectacle: a "feeble minded ofay."

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<sup>83</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 186.

<sup>84</sup> Le Roi Jones, *Dutchman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971) 35.

<sup>85</sup> It is not surprising that Jones chooses the affluent, predominantly white area of the Upper East Side referred to as the 'Gold Coast' as the location for a potential black 'retribution' killing. However, his specific choice of East Sixty-seventh Street may be loosely related to the location of the Seventh Regiment Armory (1877-9) which takes up a whole block at the corner of Park Avenue and East-Sixty seventh. The only armory in the US to be built using completely private funding, it was the home of the 'Silk Stocking' regiment whose nickname came from the high number of wealthy New York dignitaries in its ranks. With its exterior based in part on a medieval fortress, complete with arrow loops and "furnished and detailed on its interior by Louis Comfort Tiffany," this building was a bastion of white power and decadence. Ironically, Robert Fulton Cutting (1852-1934) once lived at number 22 East Sixty-seventh Street, and was the celebrated leader of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. Norval White and Elliot Willensky, *ALA Guide to New York City* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000) 395.

Kerouac is not sensitive to racial and cultural divisions present in the jazz club. In terms of experience, black and hipster white become forged together through jazz. He does not differentiate between Beat willed and black unwilled social exclusion. The tenorman's expression says to Kerouac "hey now, what's this thing we're all doing in this sad brown world," and Kerouac responds: "because here we were dealing with the pit and prunejuice of poor beat life itself in the god-awful streets of man."<sup>86</sup> The tenorman's 'we' appears to address a united black and white audience. Kerouac's blurring of the term 'beat' further suggests that the Beat poets and those who are 'beat' (living in poverty in the ghetto) are somehow brought together in shared experience. Ironically, the Beat poets are not "dealing with" life in the "god-awful streets" of the ghetto as Kerouac professes; they are merely tourists and their reason for being in "this sad brown world" is based solely upon a matter of choice.

The blurring of Beat and black continues as Kerouac superimposes images of his white bohemian counterparts onto black bodies. This occurs on two occasions in quick succession. A new tenorman takes to the stage, to which Sal comments: "he looked like a Negro Hassel."<sup>87</sup> Later in the performance a "Negro preacherman" arrives causing Dean to scream, "It's Carlo Marx!"<sup>88</sup> Kerouac's transformation of the African American men into a black Hassel (Hunke) and Marx (Ginsberg) relates back to Panish's earlier comments regarding 'Romantic Primitivism' and the unreal image and also hook's work on white 'moulding' of black bodies. Kerouac endows the black body with a primitive and simultaneously threatening and erotic aesthetic, but adds the facial features of a white bohemian. The unreal image which results is a hybrid of both Beat and black existence 'beyond mass experience'. For Kerouac, this image is a

<sup>86</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 187.

<sup>87</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 187.

<sup>88</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 189.

powerful one and is positioned in defiant opposition to the white mainstream. It holds the albeit racist trope of black outsidership, rebellion, madness and strangeness but has a face with which Kerouac is familiar, making it knowable and therefore understandable.

If, as Rexroth states, Kerouac knows nothing about jazz or African Americans, the act of projecting Beat characteristics onto black jazz musicians is a way of forging a delusory proximity to the black community. The phenomenon echoes *New York: An Intimate Guide* quoted earlier: "Within a few yards, within a few minutes, the New Yorkers have all turned black."<sup>89</sup> After entering the ghetto, Kerouac's vision is sufficiently distorted to the extent that the Beats 'turn' black and the blacks 'turn' Beat. This is the ultimate expression of "Wishing I were a Negro."<sup>90</sup>

The reality behind Kerouac's distorted vision is that the Beats are merely striving to 'pass' as black men. 'Passing' is an act which is most commonly associated with the black community. Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) centres upon the attempts of black women to 'pass' as white in white bourgeois society. 'Passing' allows them the freedom to attend prestigious social events, bridge parties and eat at restaurants which would usually turn away black diners. Even though the women are pale skinned, they must carefully conceal their race. They hide behind an "ivory mask"<sup>91</sup> of face powder and modify their speech and movement. The act is described by Larsen as a "hazardous business...breaking away from all that was familiar...to take one's chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly."<sup>92</sup> Kerouac's 'passing' is similar in nature to the extent that it is hazardous, a breaking away from the familiar and a move into another potentially

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<sup>89</sup> Burroughs 268.

<sup>90</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* 169.

<sup>91</sup> Nella Larsen, *Passing* (London: Serpent's Tale, 2001) 157.

<sup>92</sup> Larsen 157.

hostile environment, however the Beats partake in a kind of 'reverse passing'. from white to black. Irene, a character in Larsen's novel comments: "It's easy for a Negro to 'pass' for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to 'pass' for coloured."<sup>93</sup>

In terms of the physical act of 'reverse passing,' the 1950s white 'blackface' performers in the *Black and White Minstrel Show* could be viewed as an example in popular culture, although the intention was not to conceal race, but to parody the African American culture of the Deep South. Similarly, Grace Halsell's *Soul Sister* (1969) is a journalistic account of her medically changing the colour of her skin and going to Harlem and Mississippi to experience life as a black woman. As with Kerouac, Halsell is also clearly aware of the political significance of crossing invisible racial boundaries within the city: "there are signs you don't see, big, lurid signs all over this country. They shout out: you are white, you are a white woman and you have no business going into the ghetto -it belongs to them. And all the rest, *all* the rest, belongs to you."<sup>94</sup>

Unlike Kerouac, Halsell questions her encroachment on the ghetto given the imbalance between black and white power and land ownership. There is an implicit understanding of territorial division and surveillance, specifically how access to ghetto is determined by skin colour. As a white female journalist Halsell would be viewed as an intruder; by 'passing' as a black women, she is allowed access to areas which would normally be out of bounds. Nevertheless, examples of such 'reverse passing' are understandably rare.

Kerouac and his fellow hipsters do not make any such attempt to conceal their race, nor do they see themselves as intruders in the ghetto. For the hipster, race

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<sup>93</sup> Larsen 206.

<sup>94</sup> Grace Halsell, *Soul Sister* (Washington DC: Crossroads, 1999) 51.

becomes a performance. Eburne touches upon this briefly, drawing attention to “Judith Butler’s contention that “identity” itself operates not as a predeterminate ontological category but as a regulatory, and often oppressive, practice of cultural formation.”<sup>95</sup> Eburne argues that Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* along with Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* “seek to ‘trouble’ such regulatory practices within the context of the post war U.S.”<sup>96</sup> Eburne provides a strong argument, but does not explore the links between the hipster’s adoption of African American characteristics, such as speech patterns and Butler’s work on drag in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

### **Beat Racial ‘Passing’ as Drag**

The Beats appropriation of ‘bop talk’ and zoot suits is an imitation of race, in the same manner that the cultural practice of drag is an imitation of gender. As the performance of drag “plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed,”<sup>97</sup> the Beat performance of race similarly plays upon the racial and cultural distinctions between white and black Americans. As with drag, the Beat performance of race is often a hyperbolic imitation or parody of ‘otherness’. A prime example of this form of parody would be Lord Buckley, a white vaudevillian whose comedic ‘hipsemantic’<sup>98</sup> language was formed from a hybrid of hipster and southern black dialect. Buckley’s parody could be seen as degrading to blacks in the same manner in which drag is understood in feminist theory to be degrading to women.<sup>99</sup> However as Butler states: “The loss of the sense of the

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<sup>95</sup> Eburne 54.

<sup>96</sup> Eburne 54.

<sup>97</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 175.

<sup>98</sup> Lord Buckley performed monologues on stage during the 1940s and 50s. Buckley’s performances involved the ‘translation’ of historical events into ‘hipsemantic’ language. Key performances were entitled “The Nazz,” about Jesus, “The Hip Gan” which recounted the life of Gandhi and “The Bad-Rapping of the Marquis de Sade, the King of Bad Cats”.

<sup>99</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 174.

"normal"...can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when "the normal," "the original" is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one...."<sup>100</sup> Buckley's humour was based on a similar premise: a loss of the sense of the "normal" in terms of race and the exposure of hipster speak as a failed copy.

With regards to Kerouac, Brendon Nichols states that "Kerouac's instrumentalization of African Americans, couched in affirmative stereotypes...are so exaggerated they reiterate their opposites."<sup>101</sup> Kerouac's own performance of race proves to be a similar exaggeration. However, unlike Buckley, Kerouac saw "bop-talk" as a serious practice and is part of the performance of a ghetto lifestyle. Kerouac's appropriation of elements of black culture, viewed as a 'putting on' of race or *voguing* as 'other' is undoubtedly offensive. Butler discusses 'styles of the flesh' stating: "These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities."<sup>102</sup> By adopting black style, Kerouac does not merely appropriate a way of speaking or gesturing, but also the history which formed this style. With regards to the African American, specific speech patterns were influenced by jazz and blues genres which were in turn influenced by the rhythms of slave songs. As a white male, Kerouac has no way of comprehending the painful histories which edified black style. Panish accuses Kerouac of "raiding African American culture for its method of expressing the experience of this oppression and its strategy for surviving it."<sup>103</sup> The locations of this raid are the streets and jazz clubs of ghettos such as Harlem, where black culture can be studied and then imitated.

However, as with drag, can Beat race performance be partially redeemed as a form of advanced counter-hegemonic practice? Butler ponders "the body is not a

<sup>100</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 176.

<sup>101</sup> Brendon Nichols, "The Melting Pot that Boiled Over: Racial Fetishism and the Lingua Franca of Jack Kerouac's Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003) 543.

<sup>102</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177.

<sup>103</sup> Panish 123.



“being” but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated.”<sup>104</sup> Once again, the body becomes synonymous with the city in that it too is constrained by boundaries and is politically regulated. As the hipster flâneur ‘troubles’ urban boundaries via his freedom of movement, his appropriation of elements of black culture similarly ‘troubles’ the “natural configuration”<sup>105</sup> of bodies into races “existing in binary relation to one another.”<sup>106</sup> Amid the ‘culture of containment’ of 1950s America, the hipster questions the prescribed ‘stable’ identity of the American male.

As Michael Johns states: “most women (and men) obeyed a dress code that made them look more alike than at any other time.”<sup>107</sup> Dress code operated (and continues to operate) in conjunction with a sense of place within the city. As the invisible boundaries of the ghetto held black New Yorkers in binary opposition to whites, stylization of the body reinforced those boundaries. Black style such as the zoot suit would be considered ‘out of place’ in Midtown Manhattan, even if it were being worn by a white man. The hipster’s performativity of an(other) race is arguably an attempt to challenge the polarity of black and white culture within the cityplace whilst simultaneously destabilizing racial norms. Paradoxically, the Beats’ attempts to “re-install an essential complexity within the American intellectual milieu” by forging links with socially excluded African Americans and attempting to internalise aspects of their culture resulted in the perpetuation of simplistic and primitive racial stereotypes and ultimately the gentrification of black communities.

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<sup>104</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177.

<sup>105</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178.

<sup>106</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178.

<sup>107</sup> Johns 24.

## Uptown Gentrification

Somewhat ironically, the Harlem of the 1950s which Kerouac and Baldwin viewed from such diverse perspectives *appears* to no longer exist, as *The Sunday Times* reports:

....Manhattan no longer comes to an abrupt halt where the grass runs out in Central Park....New [Harlem] even has its own tourist office. Evidence of the Harlem renaissance is everywhere. On 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the main thoroughfare, the district's first mall has opened – blue-chip businesses such as Disney, HMV, Blockbuster, Duane Reade, Chase Manhattan and Starbucks are already among the £45m Harlem USA's tenants. But the biggest name to bless what was, until recently, Manhattan's least prestigious patch of real estate, is Bill Clinton: the former president now has an office just across the road.<sup>108</sup>

This 'development' of the ghetto is in many respects related to hipster movement into black communities. The hipster spearheaded an interest in black culture and in time a larger white audience would follow them, physically and culturally, onto the 'Negro streets.' We should by no means view the commercialization of Harlem as positive. Presumably the "brothels, speakeasies, dance halls, sidewalks, corners, and stoops" which made up part of the spectacle for the postwar hipsters have been demolished to make way for the Disney, HMV and Blockbuster stores. In turn, it is clear that hipster access into the ghetto eventually led to the area being accessible to, well, the average *Sunday Times* reader. However, it is also clear that white tourism in Harlem in the year 2002 would be rather different to that of the hipster experience of the late 1940s and 50s. In a sense, Harlem itself has become Disneyfied. It bears the same name, yet

<sup>108</sup> David Wickers, "New New York," *Sunday Times* 5 May 2002, sec. Travel: 1-2.

it has become a theme park, a bleached out version of the Harlem of old. *The Sunday Times* extols the virtues of the area's first mall, yet the mall itself is a policed zone, and consequently pushes against everything Harlem stood for in the work of Kerouac and Baldwin. The 'colourful' street people depicted in *Another Country*, and the loiterers in "New York Scenes" would almost certainly be ejected from the mall by security guards. Yet with the gentrification of Harlem, the area appears to have become safer and more prosperous. In Toni Morrison's *Jazz* Harlem is described as follows:

Everything you want is right where you are: The church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner and every club, organization, groups, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable.<sup>109</sup>

Written in the 1990s, *Jazz* chronicles the hardships of ghetto life whilst remaining nostalgic for the strong sense of community present in 1920s Harlem. Morrison describes the area as a cornucopia of aesthetic pleasures: parties, "juke joints", "pool halls" and so on. Although she states that "everything you want is right where you are" she wryly comments in brackets that there are "no high schools" and "no banks". The implication here is that there is no education, and no money in Harlem. The New Harlem, as described in *The Sunday Times*, appears to have gained what it appeared to be lacking in Morrison's novel. Yet even though banks and high schools are now present in contemporary Harlem, and the area appears to be prosperous, it is important

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<sup>109</sup> Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Picador, 1992) 11.

to ask where the prosperity lies. It is more likely that the poverty of 'old' Harlem has been pushed somewhere else, that white society has cannibalised this minatorial space, making it part of the capitalist machine? Are ex-Harlemlites working in Starbucks at a minimum wage serving white middle class tourists, then on an evening commuting to a less prosperous area because they can no longer afford the rent in flourishing New Harlem? This is very possible.

The hipster 'penetration' of Harlem, viewed in the most critical of lights, appears to have led to the rape of black culture and the destruction of a black community. This was, of course, never the hipster's intention. The hipster's exploits in black communities were a form of political entrenchment, a way of positioning himself against the white mainstream. Yet we learn how, from a black perspective, the hipster can be seen as a white colonizer, as hooks states, entering, occupying and eventually possessing black territory. The hipster may see his entrance into Harlem as non-aggressive, yet for a Harlemite such as Rufus in Baldwin's *Another Country* the 'white hunter' poses a serious physical threat.

### **The Beat as 'Superhero'**

In "The Origins of the Beat Generation" Kerouac lists a number of disparate cultural sources which he believes were precursors to the Beats. With regards to the flâneur's exploration of the ghetto, three of these sources are highly significant: the Golem, the Werewolf of London and The Shadow. Kerouac makes reference to "the Golem horrifying the persecutors of the Ghetto."<sup>110</sup> Drawing upon Jewish folklore, the Golem was created out of clay by Rabbi Löw to protect those living in the ghetto in the German town of Worms. The legend dates back to 1579, when the Jewish people

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<sup>110</sup> Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," *Playboy* Jun. 1959: 31.

were being persecuted and accused of “ritual murder”.<sup>111</sup> The bodies of dead children were being left in the ghetto by the persecutors, with a “view to proving the murderous practice of the Jews.”<sup>112</sup> The folktale continues:

During the week preceding the feast of Passover, the Golem wandered about in the streets of the city stopping everybody who happened to be carrying some burden on his back. It frequently occurred that the bundle contained a dead child which the miscreant intended to deposit in the Jew-street; the Golem at once tied up the man and the body with a rope which he carried in his pocket, and, leading the mischief maker to the town hall, handed him over to the authorities.<sup>113</sup>

It is possible that Kerouac relates this folktale to 1950s Manhattan and the Harlem ghetto. The Beats become Golem-like figures, defending the name of the Harlemites. In certain respects the Golem bears a resemblance to the classic flâneur, not only because he is a wanderer but also because he holds a talisman which, “rendered the man of clay invisible, while he himself was able to see everything.”<sup>114</sup> Although the Beats do not *physically* protect the ghetto, their wanderings and subsequent documentation of black communities can be seen as an attempt to dispel extant stereotypes of the African American formed by their persecutors. Ironically, the Golem does not have the power to understand anything happening around him<sup>115</sup> and has “only small powers of discernment, being unable to grasp anything belonging to the domain of real intelligence and higher wisdom.”<sup>116</sup> It would be brutal to apply

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<sup>111</sup> Angelo S. Rappoport, *The Folklore of the Jews* (London: Soncino Press, 1937) 195.

<sup>112</sup> Rappoport 195.

<sup>113</sup> Rappoport 196.

<sup>114</sup> Rappoport 196.

<sup>115</sup> Rappoport 196.

<sup>116</sup> Rappoport 203.

this directly to the Beats, yet it is clear that like the Golem, they too have limited comprehension of ghetto life.

Kerouac's references to The Shadow and the Werewolf of London are equally revealing. The Shadow was a pulp fiction hero created by Walter B. Gibson and first appeared in *Fame and Fortune* magazine in 1929. Alongside appearing in pulps, The Shadow became a popular 1930s radio show with the tagline: "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!"<sup>117</sup> This line seems to relate directly to Beat attempts to understand the Manhattan underworld, examined in chapter four. In "The Origins of the Beat Generation" Kerouac writes: "Lamont Cranston so cool and sure suddenly becoming the frantic Shadow going mwee hee hee ha ha in alleys of New York imagination."<sup>118</sup> 'The alleys of the imagination' echoes my earlier discussion of the Beat's shift of Trilling's 'reality' from mind to body to city. The Shadow also shares similarities to the flâneur as he also can move invisibly. However, what is most interesting is Kerouac's reference to Lamont Cranston. Kerouac makes an error here, as The Shadow's real name was Kent Allard. Lamont Cranston was an explorer and big game hunter, whose name The Shadow used as an alias. Kerouac's error provides a more than appropriate description for the hipster's activities in Harlem. Like The Shadow, he is a nocturnal wanderer who is at home in the alleyways: an observer of New York's underbelly. Furthermore, in terms of visibility, Kerouac was remembered by David Amram as saying: "a writer should be like a shadow, just be part of the sidewalk like a shadow." Here Kerouac observes the methodology of the classical Parisian flâneur.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> "The Shadow," *An International Catalogue of Superheroes*, ed. Loki Midgaard, 20 May 2007 <[http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/s\\_shadpulp.htm](http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/s_shadpulp.htm)>.

<sup>118</sup> Kerouac, "Origins..." 32.

<sup>119</sup> David Amram, qtd. in Gifford 288.

Nevertheless, Kerouac is also an explorer and big-game hunter like Cranston and is fascinated by the exotic. The idea of the nocturnal hunt is perpetuated by further references to *The Werewolf of London*: "a distinguished doctor in his velour smoking jacket, smoking his pipe over a lamplit tome on botany and suddenly hairs grow on his hands, his cat hisses and he slips out into the night."<sup>120</sup> On first consideration, the *Werewolf of London* bears a stronger resemblance to Patrick Bateman, discussed in chapter five, given his drives to hunt and kill. Wilfred Glendon, the protagonist of the film, is a botanist and is in search of the exotic, in the form of the mariphasa plant. After he is bitten by a werewolf, Glendon's hunt for the mariphasa in Tibet is transformed into a hunt for flesh in the city. As a werewolf, Glendon seeks to destroy that which he holds dear. The three wanderers: *The Golem*, *The Shadow/Lamont Cranston* and *The Werewolf of London* represent conflicting drives in Kerouac and the Beats. *The Golem* is representative of the Beat Generation's quixotic vision: that by forming allegiances in Harlem they would chronicle the pain of ghetto life, promote African American culture and unite against the prejudices of Cold War politics. *Lamont Cranston* and *The Werewolf of London* are representative of the Beat's darker motives, namely: a fascination with capturing the exotic and a cannibalistic desire to feed off black culture as a means of repositioning themselves as 'hip' against the 'square' white mainstream. Like Glendon in *The Werewolf of London*, the Beat Generation are in danger of distorting/destroying that which fascinates them via their overzealous instinctual drives.

Between the two conflicting drives the latter is strongest. Despite his altruistic intentions, Kerouac's work like Van Vecten's before him, is unquestionably a depiction of white hedonism in the ghetto. Yet to completely dismiss Kerouac as a

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<sup>120</sup> Kerouac, "Origins..." 32.

racist would be erroneous. Despite earlier criticisms of his work, at least he was mixing with black people on their own turf, an act which would be considered unthinkable to most white Americans in the 1940s and 50s. His depictions of black jazz musicians are examples of Romantic Primitivism, yet he idolized these musicians nonetheless. His albeit flawed elevation of a black musician, such as Charlie Parker, still challenges the general white concensus of the epoch that African Americans were of an inferior race.

### **Taking the Uptown Train**

In *Another Country*, Rufus takes the subway from the Village to Harlem. The narrator comments:

...the doors slammed, a loud sound, and it made them jump. The train, as though protesting the proximity of white buttock to black knee, groaned, lurched, the wheels seemed to scrape the track making a tearing sound. Then it began to move uptown, where the masses would divide and the load become lighter....the train rushed into the blackness with a phallic abandon, into the blackness which opened to receive it, opened to receive it, opened, opened, the whole world shook with their coupling.<sup>121</sup>

This passage sums up many of the points discussed in this chapter. It emphasises the uneasy relationship between black and white, the discomfort of “white buttock” next to “black knee”. It in turn demonstrates that travel between black and white communities and integration of two peoples is not as effortless, or without consequence, as Kerouac suggests. On its journey the train groans with its heavy (racial) burden. As the train moves further uptown, more and more white commuters

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<sup>121</sup> Baldwin, *Another Country* 92.



slowly begin to disperse, which lightens the load. Still, the train is seen as an intrusive phallic object (symbolic of white civilization) to which the Harlem community must cede. From a white point of view, the act of entering Harlem can be seen as a sexual act, which ends in orgasm, "the whole world shook with their coupling." But from a black perspective it can be seen as an act of aggressive colonialism. Harlem has no choice, but to open itself up to the ever-gaining force of the white intruder, a force which would shake its foundations to the point of destruction.

## Chapter 3

## Attack and Counterattack: Manhattan's Homosexual Flâneur as Predator and Prey

At the beginning of the new millennium New York prides itself on being a 'multi-ethnic' city. Rather than throw a veil over the city's poorer enclaves, as done in the past, the American tourist board uses ethnicity to 'sell' New York to the potential visitor to the city. A number of the tourist websites link to *www.bigonion.com*, a walking tour company which allows visitors to "explore the many layers of New York City's history."<sup>1</sup> The tours themselves sport names such as "Historic Harlem: As the center of African American culture, Harlem is one of New York's most intriguing neighbourhoods," "Multi-Ethnic East Harlem: A walk through northern Central Park and El Barrio, exploring these vibrant and diverse communities" and "Immigrant New York: A multi-ethnic walking tour through the Jewish East Side, Chinatown, Little Italy, and what used to be called Little Germany, Little Ireland, and Little Africa."<sup>2</sup>

The majority of the tours are ethnocentric, each billed as a celebration of the vivacity and diversity of those who were once thought of as New York's excluded 'others'. The fact that walking tours can be conducted safely in areas such as Harlem and El Barrio is a testament to the way in which these areas have been, to an extent, sanitized and homogenized. In 1926 Clement Wood admitted in *A Guide to New York City's Strange Sections* that it "was not safe to walk down these ratways."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, as discussed in the previous chapter, Baldwin demonstrates that 1950s Harlem is a perilous place for the white wanderer. Now it appears that large groups of tourists can enter these zones and marvel at how they have 'developed'. The irony is that the walking tours do not and cannot penetrate into areas which remain as ghettos. The 'Historic Harlem' guide may lead his or her troop of tourists around the

<sup>1</sup> *Big Onion*, ed. Seth Kamil, 6 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.bigonion.com>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Big Onion*, ed. Seth Kamil, 6 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.bigonion.com>>.

<sup>3</sup> Wood 9.

neighbourhood, pointing out sites associated with “Zora Neal Hurston, Marcus Garvey, and Langston Hughes,”<sup>4</sup> but he or she will not venture into the areas where abject poverty amongst ethnic minorities continues to be an issue, due to the obvious dangers. Consequently, those participating in the tour do not get to see the Harlem that existed before ‘sanitation’, the ghetto which the likes of Hurston, Garvey or Hughes grew up in: they see ‘New Harlem’ a commodified ethnic space.

A similar phenomenon occurs in New York with regard to ‘queer space’. As Dereka Rushbrook states: “To stake a claim to cosmopolitanism, one of the most desirable forms of contemporary cultural capital, many emphasize their ethnic diversity. In a growing number of instances, ‘queer space’ functions as one form of this ethnic diversity, tentatively promoted by cities both as equivalent to other ethnic neighborhoods and as an independent indicator of cosmopolitanism.”<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising then that along with their tours of Harlem, El Barrio and numerous other campgrounds for Manhattan’s ethnic minorities, Big Onion also provides a tour entitled “Before Stonewall: A Gay & Lesbian History Tour”. The tour meets at Washington Square Arch and entreats the tourist to “discover the many facets of lesbian and gay history as we trace the development of Greenwich Village as a community Mecca. Stops include sites associated with Bayard Rustin, Willa Cather, Audre Lorde, and two of New York’s cross-dressing politicians.”<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, obvious parallels can be drawn between the Harlem ‘ghetto’ and ‘queer space’ such as Greenwich or Chelsea with regard to the urban tourist’s quest for the ‘place-based exotic other’. Those who inhabit ‘queer space’ are representative of what could be termed as ‘gay ethnicity,’ in so much as they are grouped as being an ‘exotic other’

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<sup>4</sup> *Big Onion*, ed. Seth Kamil, 6 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.bigonion.com>>.

<sup>5</sup> Dereka Rushbrook, “Queer Space and the Cosmopolitan Tourist,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.1-2 (2002): 185.

<sup>6</sup> *Big Onion*, ed. Seth Kamil, 6 Sept. 2004 <<http://www.bigonion.com>>.

not because of the colour of their skin or country of origin, but because of their sexual preference. Whereas the white urbanite could walk up Fifth Avenue to the point where “all of the New Yorkers have all turned black,” as described in the 1931 New York guidebook, he could also theoretically turn west off modern day Fifth Avenue to find that the New Yorkers in Chelsea have all ‘turned gay’. In both instances we are given the indication that due to his transgression of boundaries, whether intentional or unintentional, the urbanite has entered into an exotic world where the inhabitants, due to their colour, culture or conduct, are somewhat alien to him.

However, although it is possible to critically align ‘queer’ and ‘ethnic space’, primarily due to the fact they both house what mainstream white society would deem as an ‘exotic’<sup>7</sup> other, it is erroneous to view these spaces and the inhabitants of these spaces in the same critical manner. Evidently, there is an obvious historic cross-pollination between Manhattan’s queer and ethnic spaces, as touched upon in the previous chapter. We need look no further than Rufus’ movement between Harlem and Greenwich Village in Baldwin’s *Another Country*, in order to illustrate this. Yet the one major factor that draws the divide between queer and ethnic groups, which is highly apparent in Baldwin’s novel, is visibility.

In May 1990 *National Geographic* published an article on East Harlem, “standing just north of New York city’s wealthy Upper East Side with its shoulder to Black Harlem.”<sup>8</sup> The journalist informs us “every morning for weeks I went into the barrio, and every evening I walked slowly out again, past where it abruptly ends at 96<sup>th</sup> Street. Walking down Park Avenue, I felt the eyes of uniformed doormen of

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<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich’s definition of the ‘exotic’ as “a way of viewing a landscape, a people [or] a culture as an escape from our carefully constructed selves, our ‘real’ lives,” is applicable throughout this chapter. Here the ‘exotic’ extends beyond racial otherness, to many varied forms of outsidership. Furthermore, Rich’s definition lends a focus to that which is desirable, offering a passage of escape from the mundane on account of its difference. Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993) 228.

<sup>8</sup> Jere Van Dyk, “Growing up in East Harlem,” *National Geographic* May 1990: 53.

elegant granite buildings examining my unshaven face, my old jeans and running shoes.”<sup>9</sup> The passage is reminiscent of James Baldwin’s description of walking on Fifth Avenue, quoted in the previous chapter. Both Baldwin and the journalist feel out of place on the wealthy streets which lead to and from the ghetto; Baldwin because he is black and from the ghetto, the journalist because his appearance suggests to the doorman that *he* is from the ghetto. Two factors are at play here which make the men conspicuous: race and class. Baldwin is highly visible on predominantly white Fifth Avenue because he is black. The East Harlemites, which the *National Geographic* journalist is posing as, is highly visible on wealthy Park Lane because he is dressed shabbily. It is blindingly obvious that whilst moving within the city Baldwin cannot mask his blackness, as Irene and Claire attempt to do in works such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, and similarly those from a lower economic/social strata find difficulty hiding the fact that they are poorer due to their attire. In such instances a great deal is given away about the individual’s origins by their appearance.

With regard to sexuality, however, the distinction between straight and gay as an appearance is far less definite than that of black and white. An article by Chris Nutter in *The Village Voice* called “Home Boys” helps to elucidate this point. The article discusses the recent move of white homosexual men into Harlem, focusing upon the inhabitants of a building named P.S. 157, a converted public school on 126<sup>th</sup> and St. Nicholas Avenue. Located in Central Harlem the 75-unit apartment block is occupied predominantly by gay men, the majority of whom are white. It has become, as one occupant described it, “a gay ghetto”<sup>10</sup> within the black ghetto. As one could expect issues of visibility are quite fascinating here.

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<sup>9</sup> Van Dyk 65.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Nutter, “Home Boys,” *The Village Voice* 15 Nov. 2000: 7.

Fashion Consultant Alec Floyd confesses “I hug and kiss in the hallway and the laundry, but outside, I don’t... This isn’t Chelsea. You have to be cautious.”

Harlem has always had a significant black gay population. however, it appears that to be white and openly gay in uptown Manhattan leaves the men open to victimization. As another inhabitant of P.S. 157 admits, “I have a feminine sway and strut, so I wondered if I was gonna get my ass beat.” Outside of P.S. 157 the men check their behaviour. Unlike in Chelsea, they do not walk holding hands and are conscious that a “feminine sway and strut” could result in violence towards them. These actions, which are an indication as to their sexuality are, if not eradicated, then limited in order to insure their own personal safety. This, of course, is the dividing factor between race and sexuality with regard to issues of visibility. Skin colour cannot be switched on or off in order to help an individual blend with his or her surroundings. The men living in P.S. 157 can, however, *try* to disguise their sexuality in an attempt to integrate.

The issues of ‘passing’ in society with regard to African Americans, are somewhat different when applied to homosexuals. In nineteen fifties America those with dark skin were immediately recognised as ‘other’ and pushed to the margins of society (ghettoised). Those who admitted to taking part in homosexual activities, on the other hand, were admitting to breaking the law. The Illinois criminal code reform which made Illinois the first state in US history in which consensual same-sex acts were legal was not effective until January 1962. Consequently, the nineteen fifties American homosexual was seen as both a criminal and a deviant.

This is highlighted by the release of a report by the US Senate committee on December 15, 1950 entitled “The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex

Perverts in Government.”<sup>11</sup> This report asserted that homosexuals were a security risk not simply because they were ‘liable to blackmail’ but also because homosexuality inevitably perverted the ‘moral fibre.’ Furthermore, in April 1953 President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed “Executive Order 10450,” mandating the dismissal of all (homosexual) federal employees determined to be guilty of ‘sexual perversion.’ To admit to being a homosexual was to risk losing one’s job and ostracism from mainstream society. The fear of (at worst) incarceration and (at best) ostracisation meant that gay Americans were reluctant to be open about their sexuality.

### **‘Queer Space’ Obscured**

Due to laws against homosexuality, urban ‘queer space’ was much less visible than other ‘exotic’ spaces inhabited by society’s ‘excluded others’, such as the ghetto. The State Liquor Commission, for example, forbade bars from selling liquor to gay men and lesbians. Of course gay bars existed, however they were looked upon by society as ‘underground’ establishments, part of a ‘secret’ and rather seedy world which was to be avoided at all costs. Yet, in order to exist in mainstream society, to secure a job, or even buy a drink, gay men and lesbians had to mask their homosexuality and pretend to be straight.

The gay pedestrian may not be immediately recognisable (and therefore vulnerable) in the same manner as a black Harlemit walking in downtown Manhattan, yet, like the African American, he too sees the cityspace from a marginal perspective. For the gay wanderer the streets of New York are also, as Sally Munt describes in her essay “The Lesbian Flâneur,” a “dangerous, potentially violent, (hetero)sexualized arena.”<sup>12</sup> On account of his ‘otherness’ he is capable of attracting aggression from (heterosexual) gangs such as those addressed in the previous chapter

<sup>11</sup> U. S. Congress, Senate, *Employment of Homosexuals and other Sex Perverts in Government* (Washington, 1950) S. Doc., 81-241.

<sup>12</sup> Munt, “The Lesbian Flâneur,” 114.

in Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* or Baldwin's *Another Country*. Yet even though the homosexual flâneur's position of marginality often leaves him vulnerable (as we discover later in Allen Ginsberg's "Mugging") it also allows him to analyse the cultural construction of the centre, that is, heterosexual normativity.

Two poets that fit this description are Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg. Except for the fact that both Ginsberg and O'Hara were both gay poets living in nineteen fifties Manhattan, at first glance the two men appear to share little else other than they were born on the same year. Ginsberg was an unshaven Beat who hung out in Greenwich Village in his threadbare lumber jacket, whilst O'Hara could often be spotted at a slick Midtown cocktail party sporting an immaculately tailored Brooks Brothers suit, crisp shirt and tie. Ginsberg was more than partial to marijuana and experimenting with other psychedelic narcotics, whilst O'Hara showed little interest in the drugs scene, his 'medicine' of choice being vermouth. It is understandable then that, before their first meeting, O'Hara had certain reservations as to whether he would get along with the Beat icon. The two were to meet at a dinner arranged by Don Allen. Before the appointment O'Hara wrote a rather condescending letter to Kenneth Koch expressing his apprehension along with a number of scathing remarks regarding Ginsberg's taste in poetry.<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, the two enjoyed one another's company, O'Hara referring to Ginsberg as "one of those figures in Shakespeare always referred to as a 'ghostly father.'"<sup>14</sup>

Ginsberg did not truly establish a friendship with O'Hara until he returned to New York from San Francisco in 1956. As with Baldwin and Kerouac, the two men's

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<sup>13</sup> "He [Don Allen] said his [Ginsberg's] favourite poem of John Wieners was a ballad about Alice O'Brien who is a Boston queen who hung herself in prison by her shoe strings and it is a marvellous poem but quite far from the best apart from the subject matter which makes it pseudo-understandable. What people won't do for a point of view! They'll like anything. I like the poem too, mind you, but if one liked it one would have to like others more." Letter from O'Hara to Koch. Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993) 317.

<sup>14</sup> Gooch 317.



paths crossed once again in a Greenwich Village bar. The Cedar Street Tavern at 24 University Place was frequented by artists and poets alike. Here Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs and Ashbery mixed with the likes of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. O'Hara, who moved into an apartment at 90 University Place, began frequenting the Cedar on a daily basis.

Ginsberg and O'Hara's friendship developed from this point onwards. In 1958 Ginsberg moved to the rougher Lower East Side which would later be the setting for his poem "Mugging," discussed later. The following year O'Hara joined Ginsberg, renting an apartment on East 10<sup>th</sup> Street, some seven blocks from Ginsberg's shared rooms in "The Croton". The two visited one another regularly to discuss literature and the arts. Ginsberg was impressed by O'Hara's knowledge of Corso and Wieners and sung O'Hara's praises for introducing him to Mayakovski. Ginsberg also commented that he was "amazed" that O'Hara was "so open and wasn't just caught in the narrow New York Manhattan Museum of Modern Art art world cocktail ballet scene."<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, the poets' mutual respect permeated their professional lives. Whilst editing Don Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-60* Ginsberg placed a great emphasis on the importance of O'Hara's poetry, making him the star of the volume. Similarly, O'Hara extolled the virtues of Ginsberg's "Howl," stating in a letter to Koch that he "liked it enormously, I think he's gotten very good.....I feel very enthusiastic about him."<sup>16</sup>

Ginsberg and O'Hara's relationship was purely platonic, apart from one aborted orgy involving themselves and their boyfriends Peter Orlovsky and Joe LeSueur. As Gooch points out "[Ginsberg was] not O'Hara's biggest relationship."<sup>17</sup> Yet with regard to the role of the wandering poet in Manhattan and the eroticisation of

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<sup>15</sup> Gooch 280.

<sup>16</sup> Gooch 318.

<sup>17</sup> Brad Gooch, email from the author, 20 Jun. 2004.

the cityspace at street level the two men's influence upon one another should be considered highly significant. Ginsberg himself stated to an interviewer that:

He [O'Hara] integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to the person. His style is actually in line with tradition that begins with Independence and runs through Thoreau and Whitman, here composed in a metropolitan spaceage architecture environment. He taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making of the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. It's like having Catullus change your view of the Forum in Rome.<sup>18</sup>

In honouring O'Hara as a 'city poet' Ginsberg draws reference to the Roman Forum, what G.E. Kidder Smith describes as "the core of the ancient city.... the center of the universe."<sup>19</sup> In doing so he also draws reference to the Roman poet Catullus (c.84-c.54 BC). Although O'Hara (and for that matter Ginsberg) disdained to use academic stanzas, we can understand how Ginsberg can draw an analogy between O'Hara's view of New York and "having Catullus change your view of the Forum." To have Catullus change your view of the Forum, would be to see Rome's market/meeting place through the eyes of a romantic poet. Catulus's praise would presumably extend beyond the architecture and function of The Forum, to the citizens that populate the space, their relationships with one another, their lives. And this, according to Ginsberg, is exactly how O'Hara treats nineteen fifties Manhattan: not merely as a 'functional' cityspace, but as an environment where friends and strangers alike are bound together by their co-existence in the city streets. Fifties Midtown is the twentieth century equivalent of the Roman Forum: marketplace and meeting place.

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<sup>18</sup> Gooch 288.

<sup>19</sup> G.E. Kidder Smith, *Looking at Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990) 26.

The streets and Avenues of Manhattan, the core of the New York metropolis, become the centre of the (erotic) universe. O'Hara, as Ginsberg points out, transforms the macrocosm of "the giant style of Midtown" into the microcosm of the "cocktail environment." Street level Manhattan, what could be thought of as a highly impersonal space, takes on the atmosphere of a cocktail party: the guests (or pedestrians) may not know one another but they are free to eye one another, to flirt and to tease. As the guests of the cocktail party have one thing in common, the fact that they have all been brought together at the same party, the pedestrians are united in the same manner in that they all have been brought together on the same street. Viewing street life in this manner dissipates the tension which exists between individuals in this potentially aggressive heterosexual space. As he leads us through the city, O'Hara transforms Manhattan's masculine 'mean streets' into something rather more effete.

### **The Consumer Flâneur: City as Marketplace / Meeting Place**

"The Day Lady Died" from *Lunch Poems* introduces us to the characteristics of O'Hara's consumer flâneur. The actions of the wanderer in this poem are a far cry from Baudelaire's flânerie, in so much as the wandering which takes place has contingency, rather than being aimless strolling. As with a number of O'Hara's poems, "The Day Lady Died" records the events of one of his celebrated lunchtime walks. This particular poem is an elegy for Billie Holiday.<sup>20</sup> As the title suggests, "The Day Lady Died" (Holiday's nickname "Lady Day" is inverted) recalls the poet's actions on the day of Holiday's death.

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<sup>20</sup> Kerouac and the Beats were particular fans of Holiday. In the 1940s, news of Holiday performing provided a further motive for them to venture up to Harlem. Morgan states that "Holiday's cabaret licence had been revoked in 1949 due to heroin use." Following that time she only performed Loew's Sheridan Theatre and Carnegie Hall before her death on July 17<sup>th</sup> 1959. O'Hara's memory of her performance at the 5-Spot dates back to at least a decade before her death. Bill Morgan, *The Beat Generation in New York: A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac's City* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997) 67.

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the "The Day Lady Died" is the way in which O'Hara chooses to focus the poem on his own daytime routine, rather than the death of the acclaimed blues singer. The poet wanders through the streets of New York, where he appears to perform the role of the casual, everyday shopper. It is immediately recognisable that consumerism has driven this particular flâneur to wander. He is a window shopper, a browser, unsure of exactly what he wants. His wandering is planned only to the extent that he knows his goal is to make a purchase. He is looking to be seduced by the commodity world.

After strolling for only a few blocks, we discover that the consumer-flâneur has purchased an array of goods from all over the world. Among the items which have caught his eye are: a hamburger, a malted milk, a copy of *New World Writing*, a book of poetry by Verlaine, a bottle of Strega, a carton of Gauloises, a carton of Picayunes, and a *New York Post*, which happens to have Billie Holiday's photograph on the front page.

In certain respects the poet's consumerism is a fusion of both kitsch and camp style. Nigel Wheale states that kitsch is "mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitch is vicarious and faked sensations. Kitch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitch is the epitome of all that is spurious in our times."<sup>21</sup> The poet's purchase of Gauloises and Picayunes three days after Bastille Day could be thought of as kitsch. It appears rather pretentious that the passing of Bastille Day turns the poet into a temporary Francophile. Rather than buy American cigarettes in an American city, he purchases a French brand, almost as if to 'fake the sensation' that he is French. The purchases reflect the affectations of the poet. All of the products are concerned with the display of 'otherness', knowledge and personal style. Taking this into consideration, the purchases could also be thought of as camp.

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<sup>21</sup> Nigel Wheale, *The Postmodern Arts* (London: Routledge, 1995) 47.

Wheale states that: “camp style...originates as a private language, shared by a group as part of a common identity and a protection from outsiders; it is a perverse elitism, taking pleasure in tastes and values that are conventionally scorned.”<sup>22</sup> The poet’s purchases do display a kind of ‘perverse elitism’. The Strega, Gauloises / Picayunes cigarettes and poetry are all specialist items. They set the poet apart and also protect him from becoming recognised as the everyday man (who presumably buys Jack Daniels, Lucky Strike and pulp fiction). Furthermore, he is also buying for a specific coterie, a group of outsiders with a common identity. His purchases are symbols of a bourgeois bohemian identity.

On the surface, O’Hara’s flâneur appears less fascinated than his Parisian counterpart by the texture and fabric of human existence, the sensuous experience of being submersed in the crowd. His main concern appears to be the acquisition of desirable objects. This focus on the object, rather than the human, is a comment on consumer society itself. As Baudrillard states, in a consumer society “we have come to live in less proximity to other human beings in their presence and discourse, and more under the silent gaze of deceptive, obedient objects which continuously repeat the same discourse, that of our stupefied (medusée) power, of our potential affluence and our absence from one another.”<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, in “The Day Lady Died,” objects appear to be fetishized. Each purchase is a landmark in the poem, and the poet appears to be pulled from shop to shop by the further lure of exotic goods. There is a notable lack of ‘proximity’ with other humans, apart from Mrs. Stillwagon in the bank. The poet does not introduce us to shopkeepers, burger vendors or newspaper salesmen. This not only creates a sense of solitude, but also serves to underline the fact that communication with others is insignificant with regards to the consumer experience.

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<sup>22</sup> Wheale 47.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Le Système des Objets,” *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 29.

It is important to recognise that the purchases the poet makes are more often than not for other people: "I get a little Verlaine / for Patsy," (14-15) "...and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE / Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega..." (20-21). It seems unusual that the poet is buying presents for a number of friends on one shopping spree. His excessive gift buying suggests that he is overeager to endear himself to his coterie. In a consumer society where, as Baudrillard states, we live in "absence from one another,"<sup>24</sup> it is perhaps necessary to strengthen bonds with others through the purchase of gifts. The gift is not only a symbol of affluence, but an embodiment of emotion. Gift exchange can be interpreted as a kind of potlatch for the postmodern age. The gift itself is a measurement of the giver's prestige, a way of impressing the receiver. As Marcel Mauss states in *The Gift*, potlatch was a means of making "progress up the social ladder...not only for oneself, but one's family."<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, with regards to the consumer-flâneur, gift exchange is also an attempt to climb the social ladder, to impress others whom he considers more prestigious than himself. As outlined in Georges Perec's *Les Choses* (1965) and Baudrillard's *Le System des Objets* (1968), each object of consumption possesses a nuance of meaning and reflects a level of social awareness.

What then is the consumer-flâneur in "The Day Lady Died" trying to project in terms of self-image? His prestige is not displayed by the amount of money expended on the gift. The collection of poetry by Verlaine and the Strega are both reasonably inexpensive items. Yet both items are a reflection of his intellectual prestige. It is quite clear that most New Yorkers would not purchase Verlaine or the Italian liqueur Strega for their contemporaries. The fact that the poet has an awareness

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<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, "Le Système des Objets," 47.

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Functions and Forms of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen and West, 1979) 35.

of these specialist items, and knows where to locate them in New York, suggest that he is rather cosmopolitan in nature.

The consumer experience has a considerable effect on the poet. This is exemplified at the end of stanza three:

....I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or  
Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*  
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine  
after practically going to sleep with quandariness. (14-19)

The poet's use of language reflects his confusion. Judging by O'Hara's stream of consciousness, he is overwhelmed by the abundance of possible choices. The repetition of the conjunction 'or' emphasises this. Should he buy Hesiod, or Behan's new play, or *Le Balcon*, or *Les Nègres* and so on. His mind fluctuates frantically between choices.

The use of the words "do" and "don't" are also prominent in this stanza. "I do think of Hesiod...but I don't, I stick with Verlaine" (15-18). They reflect the 'do's' and 'don'ts' of the consumer experience. O'Hara wishes to be a creative consumer. Which purchases will present him in a positive manner to his contemporaries? Which will present him in a negative manner? He is highly aware that what he buys will have a strong indication on his character, hence his "quandariness" (19). Why is the poet so intent on endearing himself to Patsy and Mike? In *America*, Baudrillard comments upon relationships in New York City, stating:

Such is the whirl of the city, so great its centrifugal force, that it would take superhuman strength to envisage living as a couple and sharing

someone else's life in New York. Only tribes, gangs, Mafia families, secret societies, and perverse communities can survive, not couples.

This is the anti-Ark. In the first Ark, the animals came in two-by-two to save the species from the great flood. Here in this fabulous Ark,

each one comes in alone – it's up to him or her each evening to find the last survivors for the last party.<sup>26</sup>

The poet's gift buying is an attempt to fight against the "centrifugal force" of the city, by drawing objects (along with their symbolic value) and people near to him. New York is represented as an "anti-Ark" in "The Day Lady Died". Whereas the previous chapter highlighted divisions between communities, here distinct divisions between individuals become apparent. Minor instances such as when O'Hara comments "I don't know the people who feed me"(6) along with when he visits the bank and refers to the teller as "Mrs. Stillwagon"(12), when he knows her name is Linda, all serve to suggest that the consumer city is an impersonal space.

In this environment, the individual must battle to forge and solidify relationships with others. In a city where people do not take (or have) the time to get to know one another, gift exchange could be seen as a viable method of introduction at the beginning of a relationship. The gift is a concentrated statement of the giver's character and beliefs. Whether the receiver finds the gift suitable is an indication as to whether the relationship will be successful. The giver is asking for acceptance. In the case of the consumer-flâneur in "The Day Lady Died," it is clear that some form of acceptance is being sought. As with the Parisian flâneur, there is a distinct sense of alienation within the city. However, whilst shopping the wanderer in this poem

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<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *America* 18-19.



appears stupefied by the act of consumerism to the extent that it appears a suitable substitute to socializing with his contemporaries.

The poem suggests that every consumer wandering the city is prone to enter a similar state: intently focused on the relationship between him or herself and the object and seduced by the commodity world to the extent that immediate human relations blur into insignificance. The consumer becomes a solitary quester, oblivious to the occurrences in the world around him. The poem is an elegy for Holiday, but the poet is unaware of her death until he purchases a "NEW YORK POST" (25). Up until this point, he is far too wrapped up in the consumer experience to be aware of the news.

I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of  
 leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT  
 while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
 to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (14-19)

This could be looked upon as a moment of epiphany in the poem. As Charles Molesworth states: "the alienation and confusion of urban life, especially at street level, come into disorienting focus with the news of the death."<sup>27</sup> The event shakes the consumer-flâneur from his anaesthetised state, and for the first time in the poem he feels emotion for the world around him. He recalls the fond memory of watching Holiday perform at the 5 Spot,<sup>28</sup> then almost instantaneously the shock of her death strikes him and the world appears to halt momentarily. The stillness of this image is particularly effective given the prior urban frenzy. The spell of consumerism is

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1979) 132.

<sup>28</sup> The 5-Spot at 5 Cooper Square originated as a Bowery flophouse located between East 4<sup>th</sup> and East 5<sup>th</sup> Street. It became a regular venue for revered musicians such as John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus, Thelonious Monk and Holiday herself. The Beats, along with artists such as Willem de Kooning and Grace Hartigan were regulars. Morgan 116.

shattered, all which has gone before, the shopping spree, the gifts, become mere trivia. The only indelible memory created by this otherwise average day is, undoubtedly, the news of Holiday's death. Yet "The Day Lady Died" is not completely anecdotal. It records a universal experience at street level. As Molesworth notes, O'Hara "presents us with a 'typical' urban experience by having the newspaper headline, with its announcement of some tragic event, serve as a sudden crude displacement of our reverie."<sup>29</sup> Every city dweller could relate to this occurrence where the mind is violently thrown from focusing upon the microcosm to the macrocosm.

In "Song"<sup>30</sup> O'Hara talks of the 'dirtiness' of the city. Stanza three reads: "someone comes along with a very bad character / he seems attractive. he is really. yes. very / he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes / that's what you think of in a city..."(7-9). It is unclear as to where exactly the encounter with this "character" takes place. The poem does bear a resemblance to Baudelaire's classic flâneur poem, "À Une Passante,"<sup>31</sup> to the extent that it details a chance urban encounter and that there is minimal contact between the poet and the "character" of which he speaks. It is unclear as to whether O'Hara, like Baudelaire, is admiring a passer-by in the street, although it is entirely possible. Still, both encounters are fleeting and erotically charged (at least in the poet's mind). This is clearly an example of how in New York sexuality, as Baudrillard writes, "evaporates into the promiscuity of each passing moment into a multiplicity of more ephemeral forms of contact"<sup>32</sup>

The city seems to deliver this "character" to O'Hara; he is one of a sea of faces the crowd sweeps by every day. As in "À Une Passante." "O you I might have loved, as well you know!" (14) speculation as to the suitability of the stranger as a potential

<sup>29</sup> Molesworth 132.

<sup>30</sup> O'Hara, "Song," *Lunch Poems* 26.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "À une passante," *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 189.

<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard, *America* 23.

lover is central. O'Hara pens the poem almost as though he were walking toward his subject in the street: "someone comes along with a very bad character," could describe anyone coming out of a crowd, "...he seems attractive," the poet has spotted his subject on account of his looks, the stranger walks closer, "...he is really [attractive] yes. very..." The poet begins to speculate and fantasize about the stranger. "...he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes..." Then the stranger passes by and is dismissed: "that's what you think of in a city..."(7-9).

The whole encounter could be likened to a sexual act. The first sight of the stranger could be thought of as arousal, then as he approaches, stimulation, building to the climax of the orgasmic "yes" at the end of the stanza, which is followed by the bathos of "that's what you think of in a city..." If ephemeral contact between two passing strangers can be compared to sex, then Baudrillard's reference to the "violence of all relations" on the New York street becomes somewhat more understandable. The street is violent in the sense it has the power to throw two potential lovers together into a 'promiscuous' encounter and then almost instantaneously rip them apart, by way of the motion of the crowd. The city is figuratively (and literally) "dirty" for O'Hara, allowing him to parasitically exploit others in his fantasies and poems.

Walt Whitman's "Are You the New Person Drawn Toward Me!" provides an eerily accurate nineteenth century response to O'Hara's speculation: "Do you think it so easy to have me become your lover? [...] Do you see no further than this facade, this smooth and tolerant manner of me? / Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real heroic man? Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?"<sup>33</sup> Whitman speaks on behalf of the stranger upon whose 'blankness'

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<sup>33</sup> Whitman, "Are You the New Person Drawn Toward Me!" *Leaves of Grass* 34.

the flâneur inscribes a (desirable) identity. He defends the virtue of the stranger who is exploited and objectified, questioning whether the flâneur can see beyond 'facades' or surfaces. A line is drawn between the 'real' man and the illusory erotic image which the flâneur creates for his own titillation.

O'Hara's flânerie can be seen as a form of cruising. Each passer-by is looked upon as an option or potential partner. There is a distinct sense of consumerism here. On the New York Street a lover can be selected from the crowd as easily as "a little Verlaine" (14) can be selected from a range of choices at the bookstore. O'Hara celebrates the choice available to the individual in New York, whether it be in terms of product or sexual partner.

It is quite understandable that we see a shift towards the object (or product) in O'Hara's poetry. Just as the Parisian flâneur witnessed the development of the arcades, O'Hara had the perfect vantage point to witness the emergence of mass production and consumption in 50s America. Whereas Baudelaire's flâneur wanders in search of spectacle, O'Hara's consumer flâneur wanders with the aim of making a purchase or at least revelling in the choice available to him. Both Baudelaire and O'Hara have shared interests in that they both reserve the right, as Bauman notes, to "look gratuitously".<sup>34</sup> It is only the *object* of their gaze which varies. The flâneur essentially focuses upon people, whilst the consumer is drawn to products. Similarly, the flâneur selects images which stimulate him in the same way the consumer selects desirable products. Both are fascinated by surfaces.

### **'Queering' Manhattan: Poetic Homoeroticization of the Cityplace**

If the French poets saw their city as a woman, then New York is almost certainly a rugged male. This ruggedness is inherent not only in the archetypal view of

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<sup>34</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 173.

New Yorkers – tough and independent – but in every object which makes up the city itself. In “Mugging,” for example, the ‘street furniture’ that Ginsberg describes has a weighty presence, an innate toughness, which allows it to survive city life. In O’Hara’s “F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53,” O’Hara constructs a high camp urban space, deliberately distorting the street furniture’s ‘ruggedness’ into an image which is pleasurable to the gay flâneur:

I am getting tired of not wearing underwear  
and then again I like it

strolling along

feeling the wind blow softly on my genitals  
though I also like them encased in something  
firm, almost tight, like a projectile

at

street corner I stop and a lamppost is  
bending over the traffic pensively like a  
preying mantis, not lighting anything,  
just looking...<sup>35</sup>

This poem introduces us to a number of themes which are recurrent in O’Hara’s work. The poem itself immediately links the act of walking with (homo)eroticism. At the beginning of the poem O’Hara appears to be in two minds as to whether it is a good idea to wear underwear or not whilst walking in the city. Without underwear, walking is highly pleasurable, but then again, he also likes his genitals “encased in something / firm, almost tight, like a projectile” (5-6). When he is not wearing underwear, the wind caresses his genitals, as would a lover. This is of course emphasised by the use of the

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<sup>35</sup> O’Hara, “F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53,” *Collected Poems* 420.

word “blow”, a reference to oral sex. When wearing underwear his genitals are restricted, yet there is also something sexually stimulating about this restriction, emphasised by the words “firm”, “tight” and “projectile”. Consequently, we get the impression that the elasticity of his “tight” underwear is straining to conceal an erection. Regardless of whether or not he is wearing underwear the *urban* walking sensation is depicted as arousing, almost masturbatory. The city is clearly filled with desirable homoerotic images, and there is a suggestion here that the act of walking is a way of pleasuring oneself whilst viewing this urban pornography.

For O’Hara, the (homo)erotic urban image is not made up merely by other pedestrians. This is highlighted by the way in which he lends a playful camp sexuality to the street furniture. Rather than perpetuate the aforementioned ‘rugged’ stereotype, the idea that the lamppost is “bending over” is highly suggestive, especially after referring directly to his own genitalia. The image offers a momentary tableau of homosexual sex. Incorporated within this image is also a sense of voyeurism. O’Hara turns the lamppost into a kind of inorganic flâneur “bending over the traffic pensively like a preying mantis, not lighting anything, just looking.” The idea that it is “not lighting anything, just looking,” allows the noninstrumental lamppost to take on a similar personality to that of the poet himself, the louche dilettante ‘botanising on the asphalt’. Like the Parisian flâneur the lamppost has nothing to do all day, so it passes its time looking ‘pensively’ at others. The use of the simile “like a preying mantis” not only accentuates the lamppost’s angular, pensive ‘stance’ but also gives it a predatory quality. This in turn prepares us for the rest of the poem, whereby everyone in the city appears not only to be watching but also ‘playfully’ stalking everyone else:

it’s the blue everyone

is talking about an enormous cloud which hides

the observatory blimp            when you  
 ride on a 5th Avenue bus you hide on a 5<sup>th</sup>  
 Avenue bus I mean compared to you walking  
 you don't hide.... (14-19)

The 'observatory blimp,' obscured by a veil of cloud, heightens the sense of voyeurism within the poem. The airship is a predator in its own right, waiting to break from its cover and ogle the city. The passengers on both the blimp and the bus view the city from diverse perspectives, yet they are united by the fact that they are both viewing the public space from a semi-public space. Once the pedestrian enters a form of transport, public or private, he is removed from the walking or 'street' experience. As O'Hara states, it is possible to "hide" on a "5<sup>th</sup> Avenue bus," whereas the pedestrian is exposed. O'Hara's movement within the city becomes a performance of display and concealment: a dance of the seven veils. Aware of the sense that he is being watched, he flirts with the city by moving from visible to hidden spaces.

The idea of 'stalking' is rich in a number of O'Hara's poems. As in "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53," there is no malice involved in this act yet O'Hara is, almost without exception, the hunter tracking down the salacious image. His treatment of the workmen in "A Step Away From Them" is a prime example of this. O'Hara writes:

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
 or a walk amongst the hum-coloured  
 cabs. First down the sidewalk  
 where labourers feed their dirty  
 glistening torsos sandwiches  
 and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets  
 on. They protect them from falling

bricks, I guess...<sup>36</sup>

As he passes a construction site O'Hara rests his gaze on some labourers who, like the poet himself, are on their lunch break. Labourers are traditionally a stock symbol of rugged Manhattanite masculinity. The image of burly workmen sitting on a girder high above the city having lunch has become an iconic American image, symbolic of the masculine toil and bravery behind the construction of the great metropolis.

Rather than focus on their work clothes, O'Hara's gaze falls on what he describes as their "dirty" and "glistening torsos". The description itself is indeed bodily. The use of the word "torso" indicates that O'Hara's gaze is locked on to the men's pectoral and abdominal muscles. All other appendages appear at this point in time to be extraneous. As Gooch points out, the "construction workers - staples of the midtown terrain – are made to seem mysterious and glamorous and tropically sexual."<sup>37</sup> The use of the word 'glistening' serves to emphasise the men's 'exotic' qualities. Furthermore, the use of the words 'feed,' 'dirty' and 'helmet' (in this order) add to the sexual innuendo. The men may be feeding themselves, their torsos may be dirty, they may even be wearing helmets, yet O'Hara's fantasy is clearly to get 'dirty' *with* the men, to 'feed' them, to touch their 'helmets'. O'Hara's attraction is, of course, based on the men's difference. Their glistening dirty bodies set them apart from the other prim pedestrians sidling up and down Sixth Avenue. They are almost other worldly, a different animal entirely to the slight, somewhat effete O'Hara. And 'animal' is *perhaps* the best way of describing the workmen. They do not eat, they "feed their torsos." This in itself is highly animalistic, the idea of 'feeding' rather than eating. In turn, this serves to highlight the workmen's threat (which is part of their attraction). O'Hara's treatment of the construction workers is in a sense similar to the

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<sup>36</sup> O'Hara, "A Step Away From Them," *Lunch Poems* 18.

<sup>37</sup> Gooch 289.



way he treats the street furniture in "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53." He takes one of the stock images of urban masculinity / toughness / ruggedness and offers it to the reader as a homoerotic image. The workers, "staples of the [heterosexual] midtown terrain," become camp street performers for the pleasure of the gay flâneur.

### **Urban Jungle: The 'Exotic' Metropolis**

As O'Hara moves on he highlights the ethnic diversity of passers by. After the workmen, the second group of characters he focuses upon is an African American and a blonde chorus girl. "A / Negro stands in a doorway with a / toothpick, languorously agitating/ / A blonde chorus girl clicks: he smiles and rubs his chin." (19-22) If we consider the two characters' attributes, the African American is male, dark skinned, with dark hair and brown eyes whilst the chorus girl is female, fair skinned, with blonde hair and blue eyes. Visually, they contrast one another in every way. As the poet walks further he sees a group of Puerto Ricans: "There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm." (34-6)

Each of the individuals or groups O'Hara's (erotic) 'camera' eye falls upon are dramatically different in physical appearance; from the construction workers with dirt smeared bodies, to the contrast between the blonde and the 'Negro' and finally to the newly arrived Puerto Ricans.<sup>38</sup> Their skin, their hair colour and texture are all part of what Baudrillard refers to as the "violence of [racial] change"<sup>39</sup> the pedestrian experiences on the New York street. As Baudrillard explains, this violence of racial change at street level is sexually arousing in itself:

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<sup>38</sup> The mass migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City had just peaked in 1953 just before "A Step Away From Them" was written.

<sup>39</sup> "...always turbulent, lively, kinetic, cinematic, like the country itself, where the specifically historical and political stage counts for little, but where *change*, whether spurred by technology, racial differences, or the media, assumes violent forms: its violence is the very violence of the way of life." Baudrillard, *America* 18.

...The beauty of the black and Puerto Rican women in New York.

Apart from the sexual stimulation produced by the crowding together of so many races, it must be said that black, the pigmentation of the dark races, is like a natural make-up that is set off by the artificial kind to produce a kind of beauty which is not sexual, but sublime and animal – a beauty pale faces so desperately lack.<sup>40</sup>

Baudrillard's comments on the way in which the 'blacks' and Puerto Rican women add 'colour' to the city correlate closely with O'Hara's "A Step Away From Them." Both O'Hara and Baudrillard are aroused by the 'exotic', the presence of 'blacks' and Puerto Ricans in New York. Both depict ethnic minorities as sexual, but in a tribal, animalistic sense. The "Negro [who] stands in a doorway with a / toothpick, languorously agitating" (19-22) is, for O'Hara, 'sublime' yet also predatory, potentially dangerous, and a symbol of the other. Even the construction workers fit into this category of sexually enticing exotic 'other', their grimy body paint giving them "a beauty pale faces so desperately lack". This 'lack' mirrors the aesthetic and cultural 'lack' which Kerouac and the Beats saw in white mainstream society, examined in the previous chapter.

O'Hara's fascination with the exotic other is developed further in the first stanza of "Rhapsody," a poem which follows in the tradition of Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge" in its summation of New York life:

515 Madison Avenue  
door to heaven? Portal  
stopped realities and eternal licentiousness

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<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, *America* 15-6.

or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness  
 your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables  
 swinging from the myth of ascending  
 I would join  
 or decline the challenge of racial attractions  
 they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)  
 while everywhere love is breathing draftily  
 like a doorway linking 53<sup>rd</sup> with 54<sup>th</sup>  
 the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s  
 o midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too, of Holland<sup>41</sup>

O'Hara employs a number of organic metaphors in "Rhapsody" in order to depict the city as an 'urban jungle'. In the first stanza, elevator cables are transformed into "lianas", a woody climbing plant that hangs from trees, especially in tropical rainforests: "your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables / swinging from the myth of ascending / I would join / or decline the challenge of racial attractions." In this context, O'Hara's use of the word "swinging" causes us to immediately think of primates in the jungle canopy. It is rather alarming, then, that in the following lines he refers to "the challenge of racial attractions". By 'racial attraction', O'Hara clearly refers to his own erotic fascination with members of other races. If his 'jungle' and 'racial attraction' references are linked, which they clearly are, O'Hara like Kerouac perpetuates the racial stereotype of ethnic minorities (specifically Afro-Americans) being a primitive, exotic, uninhibited, passionate and animalistic people. This, of course, ties in with 'licentiousness' and sexual 'eagerness' mentioned in earlier lines.

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<sup>41</sup> O'Hara, "Rhapsody," *Collected Poems* 325-6.

The cityspace is transformed into not only a highly eroticised, but highly *exoticised* arena.

In “F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53” the city became a sexual playground, a place where lovers can tease, hide and run away from one another. “Rhapsody” follows a similar theme in that we imagine that the whole city is “swinging”. Hazel Smith refers to the city as being depicted as a “jungle of luxuriant growth.”<sup>42</sup> Clearly the *concrete* jungle is a place of *personal* rather than organic growth. New York, in O’Hara’s opinion, appears to offer a ‘primitive’ liberation, comparable to that of an Edenic garden or jungle. Here the individual can live a carefree life and can literally ‘swing’ in a number of ways: to a jazz rhythm, between neighbourhoods, worldviews, racial and sexual preferences and so forth.

Nevertheless, the word “challenge,” hangs weightily within the stanza. The *challenge* of “racial attractions” suggests that behind this breezy carefree, ‘swinging’ urban atmosphere lies far graver issues regarding race. The phrase itself makes us think immediately of Baldwin’s *Another Country*, and the race relations depicted therein. We are reminded especially of the turbulence caused by the African American Rufus walking hand in hand in Greenwich Village with a white girl. *Their* mutual attraction appeared to ‘challenge’ all those around them, who were shocked by the ‘spectacle’ of an interracial couple. It is clear then that nineteen fifties New York was not as liberated as O’Hara may suggest. If those walking in Greenwich Village look disapprovingly at the pairing of a black male and a white female, how then would they react to a white American male and an African American male walking hand in hand? The opportunity for such a relationship is perhaps more *possible* in the

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<sup>42</sup> Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001) 66.

metropolis than any other geographical location in 1950s America. However, such a relationship would not only be frowned upon, but would be considered illegal.

O'Hara's vision of a 'swinging' (or liberal) Manhattan is without doubt a utopian one. However, as with the lampposts in "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53," and the workmen in "A Step Away From Them," O'Hara sees the city the way he wants to see it. This is illustrated by Kenneth Koch's anecdote in reference to the line "There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm" in a "Step Away From Them":

'We were walking up Sixth Avenue going to Larré's to lunch.' Recalls Koch. "It was a really hot day. There were Puerto Rican guys on the street who made some remarks which made me angry. I said 'Shit. Damn it.' Frank said, 'Listen. It means they think we're attractive.'<sup>43</sup>

As Gooch points out in response to this, "O'Hara's libidinal fantasies and poetic fancies were equal and intertwined enough that he could see what he wanted to see, or needed to see on the lunch hour streets."<sup>44</sup> The Puerto Ricans were clearly verbally attacking O'Hara and Koch on the account of some aspect of their appearance. However, O'Hara turns this potentially dangerous situation to his own advantage by pointing out that the Puerto Rican's aggression was a symptom of their attraction to Koch and himself. He in turn writes that the Puerto Ricans make the Avenue "beautiful and warm". This can be seen as a form of urban self-defence for the gay flâneur. He essentially re-writes the heterosexual centre – converting 'straight' space into gay space. The masculine threat posed (potentially) by the workmen and by the Puerto Ricans is neutralised by metamorphosising these men from heterosexual bullies into objects of gay adoration. This act, in a sense, can be seen as an act of

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<sup>43</sup> Gooch 289.

<sup>44</sup> Gooch 289.

'homosexual' colonialism. O'Hara marches into the heterosexual centre, claims the images of his aggressors for himself and converts them (in his poetry) into that which they are railing against, gay men.

We see a similar, and perhaps even stronger example of this in Allen Ginsberg's "Mugging". Ginsberg wrote this poem after being mugged by a gang of youths only a block away from his East 10<sup>th</sup> Street apartment. In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire wrote that to be a flâneur was to "be away from home and yet to feel at home everywhere, to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world.

<sup>45</sup> Ginsberg, however, does not share the same comfort with his Lower East Side surroundings. The poem begins, "Tonight I walked out of my red apartment door on East tenth street's dusk / Walked out of my home ten years, walked out in my honking neighborhood."<sup>46</sup> Even though Ginsberg informs us that he has lived at that address for ten years, we soon feel his unease as he steps out of his front door. Unlike O'Hara's doorway in "Rhapsody," depicted as a 'portal' into a heavenly or at least Edenic environment, what lies outside of Ginsberg's "red apartment door" is comparable to hell. As soon as he steps into the outside world he is met with a barrage of intimidating noises; the "honking" of cars, the "roaring" of buses. The "black painted fire escapes" hang menacingly above him, "giant castiron plate[s]" cover holes in the ground. Above the city hangs a "humid summer sky Halloween." The windows of the pharmacy are "cast-iron grated" and the garbage cans are chained to "concrete anchors." Indeed, apart from the street furniture having a weighty presence, an innate toughness, which allows it to survive city life as discussed earlier in reference to O'Hara's "F. (Missive & Walk) l. #53," these lines

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<sup>45</sup> Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 400.

<sup>46</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Mugging," *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, ed. Geoffrey Moore (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 486-9.

also hint at the type of people that inhabit East tenth street – opportunists who will burgle pharmacies for drugs unless they are protected by shutters, and steal dustbins if they are not chained down.

### **The Visible Flâneur: Wanderer as Prey**

Ginsberg, however, does not appear to have the robust qualities which are essential to urban survival. He appears fragile, and here, unlike in O'Hara's Midtown, his fragility makes him conspicuous. He is paranoid of attack, and becomes the flâneur/detective scanning the faces of the people he passes. The "kid blacks & Spanish oiled / hair adolescent's crowded house fronts," (14 -15) are carefully surveyed, and embody a similar lingering threat to the "Negro [who] stands in a doorway with a / toothpick, languorously agitating" (19-22) in O'Hara's "A Step Away From Them". To be a Parisian flâneur was, as Baudelaire expressed, "to be at the centre of the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world."<sup>47</sup> Yet it is clear that Ginsberg, and for that matter O'Hara, does not possess this invisibility. Yes, Ginsberg is watching the world, but the world is also watching him, in a predatory manner:

Walked past a taxicab controlling the bottle strewn curb –  
past young fellows with their umbrella handles & canes leaning  
against a  
ravaged Buick...(23–24)

The youths are clearly the type of opportunists which Ginsberg fears. There is an overt tension as he passes the gang, an attack is almost expected. The items which the 'young fellows' are holding would appear innocent in other hands, yet in the hands of

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<sup>47</sup> Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 400.

the gang members they double as menacing weapons. Ginsberg describes the Buick as 'ravaged,' with its senses of being both violently devastated and passionately plundered. The car has become a part of the street furniture of the feral city, possibly a previous conquest of the curiously dandified youths. Are they equally capable of ravaging Ginsberg? One of the members of the gang approaches Ginsberg from the stoop and puts his arm around his neck. The description of the ensuing attack is distinctly homoerotic in tenor.

The act of mugging is eroticised by Ginsberg, almost as an extension and consummation, but also a violent perversion, of cruising. The gang are scoping the streets of the Lower East Side for someone they find 'desirable', and Ginsberg becomes the object of their desire. They move in on him and their first actions are more like an attempt to pick up a sexual partner – the "arm around my neck," the boys taking his arm (25-29) – than the first moves in the assault on a middle aged gentleman. Indeed, the attack from beginning to end is reflected as a sexual encounter.

Ginsberg imagines the gang to have decidedly phallic weapons: "These strangers mean strange business...Have they knives? Om Ah Hum – have they sharp metal wood to shove in eye ear ass?" (33, 36-7). As the attack progresses Ginsberg informs us that he has "slowly reclined on the pavement" (39), giving a somewhat gentle, even tender stress to what is, in fact, the act of being forcibly tripped to the ground by assailants.

The gang members drag their victim into a disused and derelict laundry where they search him for valuables: "...I continued chanting Om Ah Hum / Putting my hand on the neck of an 18 year old boy fingering my back pocket crying 'where's the money?'" (55-6). The hungry probing of the robber is unmistakably erotic here, although the poem is by no means suggestive of pleasure. This is more of a gang rape



than a back street seduction. The attackers become more aggressive and threaten to kill the victim, ripping his "Seiko Hong Kong Watch" from his wrist, though it leaves only "a clasp-prick tiny bruise" (67-70). The cheapness of the watch and the minor injury inflicted suggest both the desperation of the attack and the lack of real damage done. At the same time, the violent threats and the actual bodily harm of the abduction and struggle are real enough. This is an opportunistic crime by young thugs who cannot tell the difference between a valuable watch and a cheap imitation, and the aggression is plainly disproportionate to the rewards. As such, while the victim is undoubtedly violated, the last laugh remains with the poet who has lost nothing of material value and survives to ironize casual assault as forcible seduction.

The attack itself is not of a sexual nature, nor is it an example of queer bashing, as in Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* or Baldwin's *Another Country*. The gang simply intend to steal Ginsberg's money. Nevertheless, issues of (sexual) identity are central to this poem. In her article "The Invisible Flâneur," Elizabeth Wilson points out that in late nineteenth century Paris "The flâneur represented not the triumph of masculine power, but its attenuation.... In the labyrinth the flâneur effaces himself, becomes passive feminine. In the writing of fragmentary pieces, he makes himself a blank page upon which the city writes itself. It is a feminine, placatory gesture."<sup>48</sup> It appears then that the male Parisian flâneur was often associated with passivity and effeminacy. However, the New York City flâneur in "Mugging" differs from his nineteenth century counterpart in the sense that the Parisian flâneur would passively roam the streets and remain untouched, whilst the New York flâneur is victimized on *account* of his identity, his passivity and effeminacy.

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<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur," *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, ed. Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995) 61.

Ginsberg himself admits that he is (and appears) *physically* weak, “broken healed bone leg, my soft shoes, my heart” (44). Yet he clearly sees himself as intellectually stronger than his assailants. He mocks them for stealing his credit cards, but failing to take his “shoulder bag with 10,000 dollars full of poetry” (73-4). As Barry Miles states in *Ginsberg: A Biography*, several months after the attack, the poet would sell the resulting poem to the *New York Times* for “seven times the amount the kids had stolen from him.”<sup>49</sup> Yet apart from economic gain, it is also clear that the construction of the poem turns the tables on the youths by rewriting violent crime and ignorance as aesthetic desire. As O’Hara rewrites the verbal attack on himself and Koch by the Puerto Ricans as a pleasurable experience. “There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm” (34-6), Ginsberg converts the ‘macho’ gang members into homosexual lovers. As they watched and preyed upon him in the street, Ginsberg now lets his readership ‘watch’ the gang members perform a pseudo-homoerotic act. The youths desire for Ginsberg’s money becomes a lustful desire for his (frail) body. In turn Ginsberg’s fear of the muggers becomes a kind of masochistic enjoyment, an indulgence in being ‘fingered’ by younger, stronger men.

In a sense, the construction of “Mugging” is a display of bohemian superiority. The youths may have had the power to overcome Ginsberg on the street, however, in the intellectual world it is Ginsberg who has the power to attack the gang and do whatever he desires with them. His contempt for those he encounters after the mugging is also highly apparent. We follow Ginsberg as he goes to a bodega to phone the police. The man behind the counter is described as a “poor drunken Uncle minding the / store.” (“Mugging,” lines 79-80) The policemen he comes into contact

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<sup>49</sup> Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (London: Viking, 1990) 457.

with brings a flashlight to search for his wallet. The flashlight is said to be “a tiny throwaway beam, dim as a match in the criminal dark.” (88) This is of course a comment on the policemen themselves; they are dim (all one of them wants to do “is sit in the car” (86)) and ineffectual against crime. The whole crowd to Ginsberg are, to borrow a term from Julia Kristeva, “cadaverized.”<sup>50</sup> In comparison to the poet’s sharpness, they are dull, uneducated and lifeless. The shopkeeper is seen as a lush, unfit to mind a store, the police are ignoramuses, unfit to fight crime – each individual we encounter in the ‘crowd’ is intellectually inept. Only Ginsberg himself is seen as truly alive, aware of and responsive to the monotony of every day life.

This of course is characteristic of the flâneur. He does not see himself as trapped in the drudgery of life. As homosexual flâneurs it is true to say that both Ginsberg and O’Hara see themselves as (literally) “A Step Away From Them,” critically watching the rest of the world who are driven by the habit of their everyday existence. In 1987 Ginsberg expressed the flâneurian sentiment in his poem “Proclamation”: “...I really am God himself. / Not at all human. Don’t associate me / w/that Crowd.”<sup>51</sup> Yet although the flâneur’s poetic persona can often be likened to an omniscient, omnipotent being, in terms of the poet/crowd relationship there continues to be a highly apparent slave / master dialectic in operation, which is displayed most explicitly in “Mugging”. The flâneur poet is passive when confronted by the crowd, yet from behind his mask of passivity he “scorns his tyrants hysterical weaknesses.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Vulnerability at Street Level**

As for O’Hara, the reality of the public and semi-public space poses a distinct threat to Ginsberg. “Mugging” aside, Ginsberg chronicles two verbal attacks in the poems “Uptown” and “Lower East Side (After Reznikoff).” In “Uptown,” Ginsberg

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<sup>50</sup> Kristeva 7

<sup>51</sup> Ginsberg, “Proclamation,” *Selected Poems 1947- 1995* 369.

<sup>52</sup> Kristeva 7.

enters the semi-public space of an uptown bar. Whilst gossiping about Panna Grady<sup>53</sup> he is verbally abused by another customer:

Yellow-lit Budweiser signs over oaken bars,  
 "I've seen everything" – the bartender handing me change of \$10  
 I stared at him amiably eyes thru an obvious Adamic beard –  
 with Montana musicians homeless in Manhattan, teenage  
 curly hair themselves – we sat at an antique booth & gossiped,  
 Madame Grady's literary salon a curious value in New York -  
 "If I had my way I'd cut off your hair and send you to Vietnam"  
 "Bless you then" I replied to the hatted citizen hurrying to the  
 bathroom door  
 upon wet dark Amsterdam Avenue decades later –  
 "And if I couldn't do that I'd cut your throat" he snarled farewell,  
 and "Bless you sir" I added as he went to his fate in the rain, dapper  
 Irishman.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, in "Lower East Side (After Reznikoff)" Ginsberg is verbally attacked on the street:

That round faced woman, she owns the street with her three big dogs,  
 she screeches at me, waddling with her shopping bag across Avenue B  
 Grabbing my crotch, "Why don't you talk to me?"  
 baring her teeth in a smile, voice loud like a taxi horn,  
 "Big Jerk...you think you're famous?" – reminds me of my mother.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Panna Grady (wittily nicknamed by the Beats 'pan of gravy') was an American heiress with Rockefeller connections. She was known to dole out blank cheques to mendicant beat poets and delighted in playing hostess at parties in the Dakota Hotel which put together uptown intellectuals with those from the Lower East Side. She was said to adore drug-related writers in particular.

<sup>54</sup>Ginsberg, "Uptown," *Selected Poems 1947-1995* 369.

<sup>55</sup>Ginsberg, "Lower East Side (After Reznikoff)," *Selected Poems 1947-1995* 323.

In both poems, written in April 1966 and April 1980 respectively, Ginsberg is attacked due to his 'otherness'. In "Uptown," Ginsberg receives a frosty reception in the bar. Firstly, the bartender comments, "I've seen everything," which we guess is a derogatory reference to the appearance of Ginsberg and his party. Ginsberg himself reminds us that he is sporting his trademark "Adamic beard," and that the curly haired Montana musicians he is with are "homeless in Manhattan," and therefore are presumably also dressed in a scruffy manner. It is immediately apparent that this is not a Greenwich Village bar, such as the White Horse or the Cedar Street Tavern, where bartenders would find characters such as Ginsberg and the musicians to be a rather common spectacle. Removed from the 'liberal' Village, it is clear that Ginsberg is open to attack on account of his appearance.

Ginsberg and his party break all of the unwritten social codes of conduct instilled by McCarthyism, with his "Adamic beard," long curly hair, threadbare lumber jacket and so forth. The idea that the man in the bar wants to cut off Ginsberg's hair and send him to war is, essentially, an attempt to Americanise him. The man appears to believe that short hair would make Ginsberg (appear) like all of the other 'clean living' Americans, and going to war would somehow be proof of his patriotism. When Ginsberg encounters the man again "upon wet dark Amsterdam Avenue decades later" he goes on to say "And if I couldn't do that I'd cut your throat." The further implication here is that if Ginsberg refuses to jettison his 'otherness' and become a 'true' American, then he is worthless and deserves to have his throat cut.

If this is the personality of the street why does Ginsberg wish to engage in a relationship with it? Why do so many of Ginsberg's poems begin with the words "I walked..."? As with O'Hara it is clear that Ginsberg gets a sexual 'kick' out of

walking and the images he encounters whilst doing so. In “Manhattan May Day Midnight” Ginsberg immediately establishes the themes of walking, danger and sex:

I walked out on the lamp shadowed concrete at midnight May Day passing  
                   a dark'd barfront,  
 police found corpses under the floor last year, call-girls & Cadillacs lurked  
                   there on First Avenue  
 around the block from my apartment, I'd come downstairs for tonight's  
                   newspapers...<sup>56</sup>

This poem was written in 1978, four years after “Mugging.” Choosing to remain in the Lower East Side Ginsberg had moved from apartment 4C at 108 E. 10<sup>th</sup> St. to a run down red brick tenement at 473 E. 12<sup>th</sup> St. As in “Mugging,” Ginsberg underlines the combined danger and sexual opportunity which lies outside his door. To step outside and walk is a thrill. He passes a bar where police found corpses under the floorboards, again an indication of the potentially violent nature of the neighbourhood. Was the bartender killing his regulars? Was the killer caught, or is he still ‘lurking’ nearby, among the “Call-girls & Cadillacs,” waiting to pounce on a midnight stroller such as Ginsberg? As in Kerouac’s description of an after dark Times Square in *Lonesome Traveller*, the ever present prostitutes ply their trade on street corners – titillating for some, yet Ginsberg sides with O’Hara allowing his erotic gaze to fall on a group of workmen:

At the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> under dim Street-light in a hole in the ground  
 a man wrapped in work-Cloth and wool Cap pulled down his bullet skull  
 stood and bent with a rod and a flashlight turning round in his pit halfway  
                   sunk in earth

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<sup>56</sup> Ginsberg, “Manhattan May Day Midnight,” *Selected Poems 1947-1995* 307.

Peering down at his feet, up to his chest in the asphalt by a granite Curb  
 where his work mate poked a flexible tube in a tiny hole, a youth in gloves  
 who answered my question "Smell of gas – Someone must have reported  
 in" –

Yes the body stink of city bowels, rotting tubes six feet under  
 Could explode at any minute sparked by Con Ed's breathing Puttering truck  
 I noticed parked, as I passed by thinking of Ancient Rome, Ur  
 Were they like this, the same shadowy surveyors & passers by  
 Scribing records of decaying pipes & Garbage piles on Marble Cuneiform,  
 Ordinary midnight citizen out on the street looking for Empire News,  
 Rumor, gossip, workmen in uniform, walking silently sunk in thought  
 Under windows of sleepers coupled with Monster squids & Other-planet  
 Eyeballs in their sheets

In the same night six thousand years old where Cities rise & fall & turn to  
 dream? (13-31)

Again Ginsberg overtly sexualises the two workmen. The first of the workman is somewhat feminised by the way in which he is described as being "wrapped in work-Cloth". Ginsberg is of course referring to the overalls in which the workmen is dressed, however, to be wrapped in cloth makes us think more of a lady's pashmina than heavy duty work wear. However, the "rod" and "flashlight" (with which he stands "bent") are obvious phallic symbols, as is his younger workmate's "flexible tube" which he "pokes" into a "tiny hole". Moreover, the workmen's bodies themselves become phallic. Unlike Ginsberg who stands 'botanising on the asphalt,' the men are up to their " chests in the asphalt," "halfway sunk" into the "pit". The city is humanised "the body stink of city bowels," and if the city is a body, then the hole

which the men are submerged in is an orifice, an anus. The men ‘turn around’ in the hole, and in this context, Ginsberg depicts the men’s motions in the hole almost as if they were making love to the masculine body of the city. The idea that any of these ‘tubes’ could “explode any minute,” reinforces this idea adding the potential for the city to ‘orgasm’.

Ginsberg then goes on to mention “Ancient Rome,” which leads us to think of his previous comment in reference to O’Hara and the “Forum in Rome.”<sup>57</sup> Again we have an alignment between ‘modern day’ New York City and the capital of the Roman Empire. Ginsberg ponders as to whether an “ordinary midnight citizen,” such as himself, would have wandered the streets of the ancient city, indulging in the “rumor gossip and workmen in uniform, walking silently sunk in thought / Under windows of sleepers.” This section of the poem not only links the two great cities, ancient and modern, but also hypothetically places Ginsberg in a tradition of walkers who, regardless of the age, have had the same motive for wandering: sexual pleasure. Ginsberg intimates that the workmen could be working amongst marble or asphalt, the sleepers housed in tenements or villas, the thrill of walking throughout history has remained the same. The final line of “Manhattan May Day Midnight” connects both the historical and sexual aspects of the metropolis. “In the same night six thousand years old where Cities rise & fall & turn to Dream?” acknowledges the transitory nature of the great cities. As with Rome, Ginsberg intimates that New York could also in time “turn to dream,” thus underlining the importance of the city poet who captures the moment when the city is thriving, whether that be Catullus’ view of the Roman Forum, or O’Hara’s ‘cinematic’ capture of Times Square. The line simultaneously re-

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<sup>57</sup> Gooch 288.



emphasises the ‘bodily’ aspect of the city, “rise and fall” once again could be thought of as a depiction of sexual motion.

With regard to Ginsberg’s comment, “O’Hara taught me to really see New York for the first time,” it is clear that in both poets’ work there is a number of shared themes. The most obvious is both men’s sexual appreciation of the exotic, namely workmen. In “City Midnight Junk Strains,” a poem written by Ginsberg for O’Hara, the beat poet retraces his contemporary’s steps in “A Step Away From Them”:  
 “Under the handsome breasted workmen / On their scaffolds ascending Time & washing the windows of Life....”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in “My Sad Self,” a poem also written to O’Hara, Ginsberg ascends above the city, mirroring O’Hara’s “Rhapsody”:

Sometimes when my eyes are red  
 I go up on top of the RCA building  
 And gaze at my world, Manhattan –  
 My buildings, streets I’ve done feats in...<sup>59</sup>

Ginsberg takes the elevator to the observation deck of the RCA building which was next to the Association Press Building in which he used to work. From here he gains the same viewpoint as O’Hara in “Rhapsody”. In both poems ascension above the city is a shift from cupidity to purity. To move horizontally is to become submerged in the city’s passionate chaos. The elevator allows the individual to raise himself above the intoxicating “smog of desire”(22) and, as Hazel Smith states in reference to O’Hara, this perspective “reveals not just the smooth surface of the city, but its network of interconnections and exploitative underside....”<sup>60</sup> Smith draws attention to O’Hara’s statement in “Rhapsody”: “it isn’t enough to smile when you run the gauntlet /you’ve got to spit like Niagara Falls on everybody” (35-6). Standing on Madison Avenue,

<sup>58</sup> Ginsberg, “City Midnight Junk Strains” *Selected Poems 1947-1995* 189.

<sup>59</sup> Ginsberg, “My Sad Self” *Selected Poems 1947- 1995* 85.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Hyperscapes* 66.

O'Hara's scathing criticism may be directed at the rapacious nature of the advertising industry<sup>61</sup> itself or a wider criticism of the nature of life in a capitalist society. In "My Sad Self," Ginsberg displays a similar disillusionment.

The sadness and restlessness which draws Ginsberg to the top of the RCA Tower<sup>62</sup> is reminiscent of Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world."<sup>63</sup> Ginsberg's is a silent emission of pain over the rooftops of Manhattan. His motives for ascension, to "gaze at my world, Manhattan /- my buildings, streets, I've done feats in, / lofts, beds, coldwater flats..."(4-5), can also be read as a Whitmanesque proclamation of ownership and belonging. The layers of the city's vertical axis are revealed to him from street level upwards. As a citizen of New York, he sees himself as having made an inscription on each of these layers, from walking the sidewalks to making love in the apartments above: "paths crossing in these hidden streets, my history summed up" (16-17). Reading the city from this perspective becomes like reading his own autobiography. As Ginsberg surveys the horizon, neighbourhoods are further inscribed with memory: to the north, "ecstasies in Harlem," to the north east, "fabulous amours in the Bronx," to the west "new jersey where I was born." In doing so, he claims the city as his own, yet also celebrates the universal ownership of New York; the manner in which the city has been inscribed and re-inscribed by lives which precede, coincide with, or follow his own. His

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<sup>61</sup> 'Madison Avenue' is often used as a metonym for the advertising industry itself. The section of the avenue located in the Murray Hill neighbourhood became a centre for the industry in the 1920s, corresponding with the post-war budding of a consumer culture. Perhaps the most famous company to establish itself on Madison Avenue was Young & Rubicam, who employed the statistician George Gallup, an innovator of market research. However, O'Hara's location at "515 Madison Avenue" (entrance of which is located on 53<sup>rd</sup>) is further uptown, only two blocks east of his workplace at MoMA and six blocks northeast of the RCA building from which Ginsberg views the city. As Bill Berkson states: "515 is 'off' Madison on 53<sup>rd</sup>; Frank would have passed it every day to and from the Museum. Its door fascade is very beautiful." Bill Berkson, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* 543.

<sup>62</sup> The RCA building (now the GE building), at 30 Rockefeller Plaza is the tallest building in the Rockefeller Centre. The observatory roof atop the 70 story tower featured a 200ft promenade. Bill Morgan points out that "Ginsberg worked as a copy boy for the Associated Press Radio News Service, at 50 Rockefeller Plaza," adjacent to the RCA. Morgan 33.

<sup>63</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass* 13.

nostalgia is intertwined with a remorse that when he passes away, the city as autobiographical text will no longer be accessible or tangible: “where all Manhattan that I’ve seen must disappear” (65).

The Whitmanian shift from microcosm, to mesocosm and finally to macrocosm, signifies a further outward expansion on the horizontal axis, beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood and the urban horizon. The first shift is between “ant cars, little yellow taxis, men / walking the size of specks of wool...” (7) and “Paterson where I played with ants...” (11). His elevation allows for a connection to be forged between the “ant cars” which he sees below him and the actual ants which he played with as a child. Once again the cityscape becomes a catalyst for the excavation of memories. Ginsberg’s step backward to childhood marks a cosmic shift from surveying the mesocosm of New York society to the microcosm of the ant colony. Ginsberg’s scale then widens from the ant colony (childhood), back to the city (adulthood), and finally to the universe (death / “eternity”):

Sad,  
 I take the elevator and go  
 down, pondering,  
 and walk on the pavements staring into all man's  
 plateglass, faces  
 questioning after who loves,  
 and stop, bemused  
 in front of automobile shopwindow  
 standing lost in calm thought,  
 traffic moving up and down 5th Avenue blocks  
 behind me

waiting for a moment when.....

Time to go home and cook supper & listen to  
the romantic war news on the radio

...all movement stops

& I walk in the timeless sadness of existence

On descending to the street, Ginsberg creates a caesura whereupon he ponders his death. He considers two eventualities: the prospect of performing the minutiae of his daily existence, or dying there and then upon the street. The line “...all movement stops” mirrors, in effect, O’Hara’s “and everyone and I stopped breathing.” Urban life pauses, anticipating “where all Manhattan that I’ve seen must disappear” (65).

Death for Ginsberg is seen as an escape from the trappings of consumerism. He stares into shop windows, “bemused”. Behind him the traffic moves on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. In front, the show room offers him the potential to join the traffic by purchasing his own automobile. Standing on the sidewalk Ginsberg finds a position of stasis, between the two worlds. He stands “lost in calm thought,” while the city pulses around him. Consumer culture is depicted as intense toil, which Ginsberg himself cannot understand: “Confused by the spectacle around me, Man struggling up the street / with packages, newspapers, / ties, beautiful suits / toward his desire” (46-9). The man is representative of the ‘stupefied’ state which Baudrillard describes in “Le Système des Objets”: intent only upon his purchases, which in turn weigh him down. The desire which he struggles toward is a material one: like the consumer-flâneur in “The Day Lady Died,” he is stupefied and pulled forward by the lure of the next acquisition. Ginsberg, in comparison, is unencumbered. The man Ginsberg observes is part of the crowd of pedestrians “streaming over the pavements / red lights clocking

hurried watches & / movements at the curb.” Ginsberg further emphasises the hurried pace of the city, the need to arrive at work on time, and desire to consume. The act of stopping, even momentarily at an intersection, makes the crowd uneasy. Pace is dictated by the menacing presence of capitalism. Inhabitants are “stalked by high buildings or crusted into slums.” The “high buildings” become a visual representation of achievement, where height is equated with wealth and status. Those looking up from the street see the potential to ascend through hard work, but are also aware of the danger of being “crusted” into slums as a result of economic failure. Ginsberg’s description of “the battlements of window office buildings shouldering each other,”<sup>64</sup> in “Kaddish,” confirms the imposing nature of the skyscraper. The use of “battlements” transforms the skyscraper into a medieval fortress, a symbol of power dominating the surrounding community. The manner in which the buildings ‘shoulder’ each other further reflects a jostling for position and supremacy within capitalist society. The predatory nature of capitalism is explored further in chapter five.

Ginsberg assumes the role of the classical flâneur, who has stepped outside of the dictated pace of the city. Here outsidership and stillness parallels death itself. a point when the individual has no “desire /for bonbons, -- or to own the dresses or Japanese / lampshades of intellection.” Whereby O’Hara darts around the city searching for the exotic and affectations, Ginsberg refuses to submit to the consumerist crowd, the lifeblood of the city. His moment of stillness allows him not only to observe city life but transcend it. In envisioning death, he is projected beyond the limits of the urban sprawl: “thru such halting traffic / screaming cars and engines / so painfully to this / countryside, this graveyard / this stillness / on deathbed or

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<sup>64</sup> Ginsberg “Kaddish,” *Selected Poems* 93.

mountain...” The phenomenon is reminiscent of Wojnarowicz’s experience in *Seven Miles a Second*, discussed in chapter four. Wojnarowicz’s momentary transcendence, triggered by an intolerance of the city, is expressed in terms of extreme speed which blasts him out of ‘limbo’ into an abstract supernal world. Ginsberg’s state, conversely, is one of ecstasy or ex-stasis. Alan Trachtenberg uses this term to describe Whitman’s ‘processionals’, drawing upon the Ancient Greek ‘to stand outside of oneself’ or ‘a removal to elsewhere. Trachtenberg argued that Whitman employed this device to “remedy a certain [urban] blindness.”<sup>65</sup> Ex-stasis is a method of “disentangling” oneself from consumer society, a “radically urban way of seeking the soul, a way of freeing people from the hold of money and ownership [and in Ginsberg’s case, the pace of the city] to seek possession of themselves.”<sup>66</sup> In his state of ex-stasis, the city recedes. The urban clamour is replaced by “stillness,” and the streets by “countryside” and “mountains”.

It would be erroneous to dismiss this phenomenon as being a simple moment of catharsis when the poet willingly sheds body and city. Ginsberg is faced with two conflicting perspectives of Manhattan. Standing atop the RCA building, he can read and understand the city. It is a palimpsest which he himself has inscribed. At ground level, the city is unreadable. The pace, struggle and dissipation ‘confuse’ Ginsberg to the extent he, like Wojnarowicz, considers a method of disentanglement. Nevertheless, his projection from material into imaginative space is a bittersweet one, as although he liberates himself from the holds of consumerism and also homophobia, the physical city (which he read as an autobiographical text) simultaneously dematerialises.

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<sup>65</sup> Trachtenberg 173.

<sup>66</sup> Trachtenberg 173.

## Display and Concealment of Sexuality: Navigating the Heterosexual Matrix

By rising above the city both poets realise how they are, in a sense, trapped within this environment, bonded to the streets they walk in. Whilst wandering O'Hara and Ginsberg expose themselves to potential dangers, yet, within this danger there is an intrinsic thrill or pleasure. The city is unforgiving, and the majority of those who walk the streets are unaccepting of 'otherness.' Those who are weak are mugged, those who appear different are threatened and those who are gay are taunted. Consequently, both poets are caught up in a complex interplay of display and concealment within the cityplace. Butler states that: "...heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman'."<sup>67</sup> In 1950s New York, men would be expected to conform to the particularly rigid expectations of heterosexual masculinity. At street level, "exceeding the heterosexual matrix"<sup>68</sup> as Butler puts it, could result in severe castigation, exemplified by the queer bashing incidents examined in the previous chapter. With regards to homophobic assault, G.D. Comstock states: "You don't have to *be* 'one', just *look like* 'one' to be seen as a threat to the heterosexuality of the street...[sexual identity] can sometimes be constructed by the gaze of others present, rather than the performers."<sup>69</sup> In terms of sexual performativity, the street is a policed space. Any visual suggestion of sexual / gender dissidence in terms of an individual's movement, clothing or conduct may be deemed as a threat. Concealment of sexuality in turn becomes a method of urban survival, sharing a kinship with the act of racial 'passing'.

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<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (New York: New York UP, 1999) 581.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, "Critically Queer," 582.

<sup>69</sup> G.D. Comstock, "Victims of anti-gay/lesbian violence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 4 (1989): 103.

In Larsen's *Passing* we encounter Irene touching "a powder-puff to her warm olive skin"<sup>70</sup> in order to conceal her race. Similarly, in terms of concealment of sexuality, all indicators of *sexual* 'otherness' must be muted. As the African American woman must successfully perform/pass as white to be accepted in mainstream society, homosexuals must also perform/pass as straight.

As with race, sexual 'passing' is also zonal. As ghettos are formed in urban space in order to separate the white population from racial 'others,' queer space also exists at the city's margins. 'Queer space' often overlapped with other 'marginal' zones, such as the Greenwich Village bohemia and the ghetto itself in Harlem,<sup>71</sup> or in hidden locations like The Rambles in Central Park. Where the characters in *Passing* are free to remove their "ivory mask[s]"<sup>72</sup> in the ghetto, 'queer space' provides a similar degree of 'freedom' for homosexuals.

Although in 1950 New York was the first state to "reduce the penalty for consensual sodomy from a felony to a misdemeanour,"<sup>73</sup> the act remained illegal in Manhattan. Undercover police officers operated within 'queer space' with the intention of arresting those in breach of the law. It was necessary for homosexuals to read the city and ascertain when their sexuality could safely be displayed. Jeffery Escoffier comments:

Gay culture in the 1950s was invested in protecting the "secret" of an individual's homosexuality, expressing it only in a symbolic or heavily

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<sup>70</sup> Larsen 183.

<sup>71</sup> In John Dos Passos' *The Big Money* (1936) 1920s Harlem is described as an area where racial and sexual 'otherness' overlap. Pat and Dick, a white heterosexual couple venture uptown: "The only music was a piano where a slimwaisted black man was tickling the ivories... Dick and Pat danced and danced and he whirled her around until the sealskin browns and the highyallers cheered and clapped. Then Dick slipped and dropped her... Dark heads when back, pink rubber lips stretched, mouths opened. Gold teeth and ivories let out a roar. Pat was dancing with a pale pretty mulatto girl in a yellow dress. Dick was dancing with a soft-handed brown boy in a tightfitting suit the color of his skin. The boy was whispering in Dick's ear that his name was Gloria Swanson..." John Dos Passos, *The Big Money* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961) 575.

<sup>72</sup> Larsen 157.

<sup>73</sup> "New York," *Sodomy Laws*, ed. Bob Summersgill, Feb. 2005, New York, 10 May 2007. <[http://www.sodomylaws.org/usa/new\\_york/new\\_york.htm](http://www.sodomylaws.org/usa/new_york/new_york.htm)>.



coded way. Many...gay writers and artists reflected to some degree the *camp* aesthetic that was prevalent in 1950s gay culture. Gay men, transvestites, and lesbians frequently reacted to the era's oppression by engaging in camp's flamboyant, irony-charged humor. The ironic interplay between popular culture and high culture, a common trait of the camp aesthetic, was especially significant in the work of O'Hara, Johns, Warhol, and Albee.<sup>74</sup>

The 'symbolic' or 'heavily coded' manner in which homosexuality was expressed relates back to Julian Fast's work on cruising, discussed in chapter one. In order to reveal sexuality at street level, those participating in the act of cruising must facilitate a range of "little signals"<sup>75</sup> which are readable to other homosexuals, but inscrutable to those 'policing' the heterosexual street. In terms of the employment of a 'camp aesthetic' as a reaction against the 1950s culture of conformity, this is most apparent in O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" and "A Step Away From Them". In the former, O'Hara, *masquerades* as 'other' (in this case European), displaying his difference from the crowd in terms of taste rather than sexuality: in the latter pastiche he intertwines high and popular culture at street level, purchasing a cheeseburger whilst daydreaming about Giulietta Masina and Fellini.

Both poems involve a performance which set the poet apart from the crowd. As with the classic Parisian flâneur, O'Hara establishes "his dwelling in the throng"<sup>76</sup> of mainstream culture, and takes from it what he desires, yet his knowledge of high culture sets him apart from the crowd. Where he differs from the classic flâneur, is in his desire to display his difference. He does not wish to be an 'invisible' observer, but displays his 'otherness'. Unable to openly display his sexuality, he designates himself

<sup>74</sup> Jeffery Escoffier, "New York City," *GLBTQ*, ed. Claude J. Summers, Chicago, 11 May 2007

<[http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new\\_york\\_city,7.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_york_city,7.html)>

<sup>75</sup> Fast 92.

<sup>76</sup> Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 399-400.

as being a 'step away' from the rest of the crowd in other ways. By masquerading as French three days after Bastille Day, he becomes and celebrates being a foreigner in his own city. This adopted 'foreignness' parallels his actual position as a homosexual existing within the heterosexual matrix.

As with the Beat performance of black identity, O'Hara's own masquerade can also be seen as a conscious act of non-conformity, forged via an embrace of the exotic or 'other'. Similarly, Ginsberg's Buddhist beliefs, exemplified by his chanting of "Om Ah Hum" in "Mugging," are an example of his intellectual superiority, but would also be considered exotic, setting him apart from a predominantly Christian society. It is arguable that the poets' alignment with that which could be considered 'exotic' or 'other' is symptomatic of their unwilling exclusion from society as gay men. Being excluded 'others' themselves they feel a bond with all that is considered 'foreign' within their society. A celebration and internalisation of the foreign becomes a coded celebration of homosexuality itself.

Both men seek methods of escape from the confines of the cityplace. In "Any Where Out of this World," Baudelaire states that: "This life is a hospital in which every patient desires to change beds. This one wants to suffer in front of the stove, and that one believes he will recover next to the window."<sup>77</sup> He goes on to outline how in the state of suffering the soul longs for change, whereby transportation to (an)other place provides a sense of hope. Through the act of consumerism, O'Hara constructs a 'little Paris' around himself, whereas Ginsberg shuns the consumer city completely, projecting himself in a vision of death, beyond the trappings of urban and material space. This restlessness, combined with a desire for the 'other', signifies a search for a homosexual space where the poets will not feel insecure, self-conscious

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<sup>77</sup> Baudelaire, "Any Where Out of this World," *Paris Spleen* 119.

or oppressed. In her article "The Lesbian Flâneur," Sally Munt discusses this curious link between homosexuality and wandering:

The poet and traveller Rene Vivien imagined a visionary lesbian city, Mytilene, as an escape from early twentieth century Paris. The lesbian voyagers imagination is freed from cultural constraints to wander at will for in this Sapphic paradise all temporal and spatial barriers are exorcised.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of the *lesbian flâneur*, Munt reveals that wandering is a search for a "Sapphic paradise." The same idea could of course be applied to O'Hara and Ginsberg, in that their wandering is a search for an(other) space where they are free from cultural restraints. Pre-Stonewall New York was clearly far from being a "Sapphic paradise," with its prejudices and aforementioned laws forbidding homosexual sex, employment of homosexuals and so on. Even in modern day New York, where 'queer space' is becoming more and more visible, the men of P.S. 157 are by no means "freed from cultural constraints," admitting that they couldn't hold hands with another man in "Harlem" or a "Jersey Mall."<sup>79</sup> Until such a 'paradise' is discovered, the homosexual flâneur must protect himself from the verbal and physical abuse the city throws at him. As Kristeva indicates, the foreigner/outsider, when confronted with oppression, has a tendency to adopt an aloofness as a form of self defence, "indifference is the foreigner's shield."<sup>80</sup> As we discovered earlier, this indifference is traceable in both O'Hara and Ginsberg's poetry, a key example would be Ginsberg's response of "bless you," when insulted in "Uptown".

To develop Munt's argument further, it is clear that the 'promised land,' similar to that imagined by Rene Vivien *does* exist in both O'Hara and Ginsberg's

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<sup>78</sup> Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur," 114.

<sup>79</sup> Nutter 7.

<sup>80</sup> Kristeva 7.

poetry. The poems themselves are a vision of this 'promised land' where muggers are not violent attackers but gay lovers, where Puerto Ricans do not hurl homophobic abuse, but make the avenue "beautiful and warm." Here, even inanimate objects such as the lampposts are bent efftely over the traffic, and the city itself becomes a male body which is 'poked' by workmen.

Unlike the harsh realities of Harlem, as discussed in the previous chapter, this world or 'promised land' exists predominantly in the imagination of the gay poet. To an extent, the poets' use of the transcendental power of the imagination parallels the discussion of Trilling's 'reality' in the previous chapter. Both poets aim to destabilize cultural ideas regarding the 'naturalness' of gender and sexuality, by transposing a 'visionary' homosexual cityplace onto New York's heterosexual matrix. The mere existence of this world is testament to the harsh realities which the gay poet must suffer. This world is created as a defence, an escape from the prejudices of twentieth century New York. Yet simultaneously, it is a form of attack, a method of disarming the enemy – it is a world where the cultural construction of the centre is *homosexual* normativity. Here the gay poet has the power to convert his aggressor into his lover, the homophobe into the homosexual.

## Chapter 4

## Illuminating the Shadow City: The Hustler as New York Flâneur

The section of Broadway which runs through the financial district from its origin at Bowling Green northwards to City Hall Park is often referred to as the 'Canyon of Heroes'. This is the historic route which is followed by New York City's ticker tape parades. The first ticker tape parade occurred spontaneously during the dedication of the Statue of Liberty on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1886. Since then, parades have been given to welcome visiting heads of state, but more commonly to celebrate American military and sporting achievements. The sidewalks of the 'Canyon of Heroes' are studded with granite strips which commemorate all 200 parades, the most recent being the New York Yankees' two championships in the World Series in 1999 and 2000 and the return of the STS-95 space crew in 1998. Heading into Midtown, Broadway is nicknamed the 'Great White Way' between 42<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> streets, on account of the millions of lights which illuminate the theatre district's main thoroughfare.

North of City Hall Park, The Bowery parallels Broadway to the east. The Bowery can be seen as Broadway's sinister double. Whereas the downtown stretches of Broadway commemorate outstanding achievement, its midtown portion being "the most brilliantly lit area of the city,"<sup>1</sup> the history of The Bowery is one of failure and darkness. Sante touches upon the dichotomy between Broadway and its "shadow companion" stating:

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<sup>1</sup> Sante notes that "although the appellation the Great White Way did not come until the twentieth century, it was noted much earlier that whatever stretch of Broadway happened to be hosting the greatest number of theatres was the most brilliantly lit area of the city." Sante 11.

...their respective theatrical districts came to epitomise respectability in the case of the former and cheap flash in the latter and as the years went on, these qualities expanded in the popular mind, so that the two avenues came, however inaccurately, to stand for moral poles.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the two streets standing for moral poles, Broadway's heroes stand in opposition to The Bowery's villains who inhabited its various grogeries, brothels and flophouses. The brilliant lights of the 'Great White Way' are contrasted by the comparative darkness of The Bowery, permeated only by what the wandering nineteenth century journalist George G. Foster described as "the brandy coloured light" which emanated from the bars, alongside "the sound of loud talking, laughter and blasphemy."<sup>3</sup> The Bowery's *spiritual* darkness is further emphasised by the fact that it is the only major thoroughfare in Manhattan not to have had a church built upon it.<sup>4</sup> The two streets run parallel to one another, yet in terms of character are binary opposites: hero versus villain, light versus dark and good versus evil. Nevertheless, the fact that they have a doubled or mirrored identity indicates they are in many ways reliant upon one another. The darkness of The Bowery is defined in opposition to the light of Broadway, and vice versa.

Rather than focus on specific spatial differences, this chapter seeks to investigate alternate dimensions within the cityspace: namely the surreal transformation of the city at nightfall. The existence of Broadway and its sinister doppelganger<sup>5</sup> highlights the spatial dimensions of duality produced within the

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<sup>2</sup> Sante 11.

<sup>3</sup> Foster, *New York by Gaslight* 110.

<sup>4</sup> Sante 12.

<sup>5</sup> Doppelganger is perhaps the most appropriate term to use here, given that it is German for 'Double Walker'.

cityplace. However, the works examined in this chapter reveal that the city as a whole undergoes a surreal transformation at dusk. Night is depicted as the evil twin of the daytime, ushering forth a sinister 'shadow population' which inhabits the city during the hours of darkness. Sante's depiction of the New York night reads as follows:

It is a bridge to the past, the past that shares the same night as the present, even if it inhabits a different day. The night is the corridor of history, not the history of famous people or great events, but that of the marginal, the ignored, the suppressed, the unacknowledged; the history of vice, of error, of confusion, of fear, of want; the history of intoxication, of vainglory, of delusion, of dissipation, of delirium. It strips off the city's veneer of progress and modernity and civilisation and reveals its wilderness.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage from *Low Life*, Luc Sante makes a number of fascinating observations with regards to nocturnal New York. Firstly, he highlights how little the night has changed throughout the evolution of the city. In the light of day, the face of the city may have changed dramatically. However, at nightfall the same dark passages and alleyways appear, filled with the same malevolent characters. Sante underlines that on any given night, every street, alleyway, or corner is a link to New York's violent past: "Any corner can be in 1860, with the walker hit on the back of the head with a sash weight...Any passage can be in 1880, with men listening for the rustle of a skirt to leap out and chloroform the pedestrian."<sup>7</sup> The streets become a sinister palimpsest, with the gruesome details of past crimes leaving an indelible mark on the paving stones upon which they took place. Those individuals that inhabited the New York

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<sup>6</sup> Sante 358.

<sup>7</sup> Sante 358-9.

night throughout history are in turn inextricably linked. The twenty first century mugger walks the same dark streets as his nineteenth century counterpart intent on committing the exact same crime. He retraces the same steps as his predecessor; his eye may be caught by the glint of a Rolex rather than that of a pocket watch, yet his desire is identical. An invisible bond between the two men is thus formed.

The history of daytime New York may chronicle the lives of “famous people” or “great events,” yet the history of the nocturnal city is undoubtedly written and controlled by the people of the night, the excluded others. It is a history of fights, murders, heists and riots. This in turn leads to Sante’s second point regarding control of the city itself: daytime New York is in the possession of those who conform, those who are accepted: the businessman and the consumer. The nine to five workers perpetuate the “city’s veneer of progress...modernity and civilisation.” Nevertheless, the nocturnal city reveals itself to be a wilderness. When dusk falls and the civilised, ‘accepted’ individuals disperse, “the marginal, the ignored, the suppressed, [and] the unacknowledged” rise to claim the city as their own. Sante depicts the city’s outcasts in an almost spectral manner. During the daylight hours they are unseen: “Swindlers during the day look like bank clerks...fences like shopkeepers...prostitutes sleep during the day, as do pimps.”<sup>8</sup> The night reveals their true identity, an identity which many would deem as evil. Those who fear victimization or arrest are empowered by nightfall as the darkness shrouds their faces. They are suddenly given freedom of movement. As the prowler car passes, the prostitute is hidden in the shadows, out of sight, and the dealer disappears into the night. Control falls into the hands of those who have an intimate knowledge of the streets after dark. Those without knowledge

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<sup>8</sup> Sante 359.



leave themselves open to being scammed, mugged, beaten or killed in an environment where everyone is “potentially both murderer and victim.”<sup>9</sup>

The authors Herbert Huncke and David Wojnarowicz were both members of this ‘shadow population’ at some point in their lives. Both worked the streets of Times Square as hustlers, forming bonds with other night people: johns, drug dealers, addicts and petty criminals. Their perspective is consequently different to that of the wanderers discussed in earlier chapters. Kerouac witnesses the “Negro whores, ladies limping in a Benzedrine psychosis,”<sup>10</sup> as a tourist looking in on the world of street prostitution. Rather than being journalistic reportage, Huncke and Wojnarowicz’s work describes prostitution from the inside looking out. This provides the opportunity to examine the flâneur by choice in relation to the outcast by circumstance. Issues of walking and observing for pleasure, in contrast to walking for survival, are therefore central to this study. This in turn leads to a re-reading of Walter Benjamin’s study of the flâneur in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, specifically passages regarding the flâneur making the streets his ‘home’. This chapter considers the social, political and literary ramifications of the streets becoming a permanent, rather than temporary, dwelling for the flâneur and seeks to examine the parallels between inversions of indoors and outdoors and day and night within the texts. Freud’s study of the ‘uncanny’ facilitates this examination. Given the shift of the home from interior to exterior, the normal and the abnormal swap places. In the work of Huncke and Wojnarowicz, this is particularly apparent at night. As citizens retreat to their homes, the homeless are left outdoors to witness nightfall and the manner in which it produces the uncanny within the cityplace.

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<sup>9</sup> Sante 358.

<sup>10</sup> Kerouac, “New York Scenes,” 100.

As with Broadway and The Bowery, the different types of light which fall upon the streets not only illuminate but determine the character of specific areas and individuals walking in those areas. For instance, the neon lights of modern day Times Square cast a demonic red glow on those standing in the vicinity of the newly erected Coca-Cola sign, and in contrast, an icy blue beneath the Samsung LED display. The significant bearing which light has on the individual's visual perception of the city corresponds closely to stage lighting and the earlier discussion of "Manhattan being a theatre from the first"<sup>11</sup> in the introduction to this study. The artificial light of nocturnal Times Square plays a significant role in the work of both Huncke and Wojnarowicz.

### Entering the Shadow City

Huncke was born on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1915 in Greenfield Massachusetts, whereas Wojnarowicz was born almost forty years later in Redbank, New Jersey. Nevertheless, their formative years were remarkably similar. Following their parents' divorce, both men's fathers had little time for them when they were young. Huncke's father, Herbert Spencer Huncke, owned a company in Chicago which sold precision tools. He described himself as part of the "nuts and bolts crowd," (Poynton qtd. in *H. Reader*, XIX) and encouraged his son to follow in his footsteps. He attempted to teach Huncke about electricity and how to handle tools however, to his father's frustration, Huncke showed no proficiency in this area whatsoever. As Huncke grew older, his father paid less attention to him, stopping only to deride him for his clumsiness. Huncke became more and more interested in wandering through the streets and parks of Chicago. Wojnarowicz's father was a sailor and rarely saw his children. On his return for

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<sup>11</sup> Sante 71.

Christmas he left seven year old David along with his older brother and sister at a shopping centre miles from their home. After this incident Wojnarowicz took to wandering in the woods looking at animals.

It was during their time wandering that Huncke and Wojnarowicz were sexually abused. In a short story, "In the Park," (1946) Huncke tells how an older man forced him into bushes at knifepoint, where he was molested whilst being made to look at child pornography. Wojnarowicz was also forced to perform fellatio on one of a group of older boys whom he had met in the woods.<sup>12</sup> Without parental guidance both men became exposed to the other side of urban life. At age twelve, Huncke began to stay out all night, visiting speakeasies and smoking pot. In an attempt to escape Chicago he took to the road, heading for New York City. He was picked up by a motorcycle cop in Geneva, New York, and made to return home. He would not return to New York until 1939 when the streets and parks in the vicinity of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street would become his home for a good decade of his life. By twelve, Wojnarowicz had also been rejected by his father and sent to live in Midtown Manhattan with his mother. He began to sniff glue, smoke hash and on the odd occasion sell his body to strangers who approached him on the street. As his relationship with his mother deteriorated he began to live on the streets of New Jersey, Long Island and New York City. By the time he was 16, he was hustling full time on 42<sup>nd</sup> street, as Huncke had done three decades before him.

Although Huncke's and Wojnarowicz's experiences on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street are separated by thirty years, there are a significant number of correspondences between them, confirming Sante's theory that the "past shares the same night as the present

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<sup>12</sup> Amy Scholder, introduction, *The Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* by David Wojnarowicz, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove Press, 1999) viii.

even if it inhabits a different day.” Their nights are loaded with the same sordid tableaux, the same wants, desires, and dangers. The street scams we encounter echo those detailed in Sante’s work on old New York; tales of hustlers duping out-of-towners and prostitutes pilfering the wallets of their clients. Due to their similar backgrounds, Huncke and Wojnarowicz produce texts which address similar issues. Both detail their own ‘border crossing’ into the ‘shadow city,’ telling a phantasmagorical tale of the crime, violence and danger associated with walking the streets of nocturnal New York.

However, although the content of their work is similar, formally the texts differ significantly. With regards to Huncke, *Huncke’s Journal* (1965), *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* (1980) and Huncke’s autobiography, *Guilty of Everything* (1987), will be central to this study. Both *Huncke’s Journal* and *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* are collections of fragments of Huncke’s journal writing. The works contain short bar room style anecdotes. Huncke describes infamous Times Square habitués, such as Russian Blackie,<sup>13</sup> or recounts incidents on the streets of Chicago and New York. Huncke may be prone to hyperbole in such works, yet his proximity and understanding of Manhattan’s criminal underworld proves revealing. Kerouac and numerous other Beats recognised this and fed off his authenticity as a Times Square creep. Similarly, *Guilty of Everything* demonstrates that life on the streets is far from what Kerouac described as ‘beatific’. Huncke details his life drifting between locations and professions and his methods of survival which involved the exploitation of strangers and friends alike. Previously uncollected material, published in *The Herbert Huncke Reader*, is also examined in this chapter.

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<sup>13</sup> Russian Blackie was one to the most well respected and feared professional criminals who frequented Times Square during the period when Huncke first started to hustle

With regards to Wojnarowicz, three texts will be central to this study. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) is a collection of creative essays discussing the author's childhood and subsequent life on the streets. Wojnarowicz examines power structures within American society from the perspective of the exploited underclass. In particular, the essay entitled "Losing Form in Darkness" views New York through the eyes of a young hustler, wandering through the city at night. *Seven Miles a Second* (1996), also published posthumously, takes the form of a graphic novel. Here Wojnarowicz collaborates with artist James Romberger, detailing his life from his first experiences as a hustler to his battle against AIDS at 37. The graphic novel borrows a number of significant passages and motifs from Wojnarowicz's earlier work. Issues regarding movement, particularly walking and running as a form of survival or escape from the streets are most vivid here. *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* is comprised of excerpts from a series of journals which the author kept throughout his life. The excerpts detailing his life on the street, alongside his friendship with Huncke himself, will prove most useful in terms of this study of nocturnal New York.

### **From Order to Infamy: Nightfall in the City**

Those who walk the streets by day, as Tony Kushner points out in his introduction to David Wojnarowicz's *The Waterfront Journals* (1996), imagine a "protective distance" (*Waterfront*, xi) between themselves and those whose lives are lived on the city streets. Kushner argues that street life "occupies another world...another realm of experience...we pass daily through this alter world untouched (except when we are assaulted by it). [Yet] we, the proud citizens of democracy, imagine ourselves incapable of the border crossing" (*Waterfront*, xi).

Once again, we find Manhattan depicted as a “mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate.”<sup>14</sup> In this instance, we discover that Manhattan is not only zonal in the sense that it is divided *geographically* into communities grouped together according to race or economic background, but that boundaries exist upon every street. Both Sante and Kushner assert that New York is divided almost into different dimensions; that a “furtive shadow city” exists within the city. Whilst walking, the pedestrian sees the edges of this alter world: the loiterer at the street corner, the surreptitious exchange of glances between strangers. Yet not having lived in the open, in public spaces, the pedestrian finds this world to be enshrouded in mystery.

It is this very mystery which draws the protagonist in Edgar Allen Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” into the public sphere:

As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene; for not only did the general character of the crowd materially alter (its gentler features retiring in the gradual withdrawal of the more orderly portion of the people, and its harsher ones coming out into bolder relief, as the late hour brought forth every species of infamy from its den) but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre.<sup>15</sup>

In many respects Poe’s words mirror those of Sante, noting the gradual progression from ‘order’ to ‘infamy’ as the night falls. Sitting with “brow to the glass” in the safety of the “D- Coffee House,”<sup>16</sup> the city’s nocturnal double proves illegible to Poe’s

<sup>14</sup> Park 40.

<sup>15</sup> Poe 510-11.

<sup>16</sup> Poe 510.

protagonist. He decides therefore to immerse himself in the crowd, signifying a move from light to dark, or *heimlich* to the *unheimlich*.<sup>17</sup> Although there is debate as to whether the protagonist can be considered to be a flâneur,<sup>18</sup> the pursuit of the old man through the dark city is clearly an attempt to read the activities of the nocturnal other. Yet, as Poe states at the beginning of "Man of the Crowd," "there are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told." Similarly, the secret exchanges between pusher and user, between hustler and trick in twentieth century New York are unknowable to the outsider. The street is thus divided between those who pass through Times Square and those who exist in it. The two authors examined in the following chapter, Herbert Huncke and David Wojnarowicz, both fall into the latter category, existing as what Sante describes as 'night people'.

### **The Times Square Hustler as Twentieth Century Flâneur**

A number of parallels can be drawn between flânerie and a range of activities conducted by the 'night people' of Times Square. A much quoted passage from Walter Benjamin on the flâneur is helpful here.

The street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him

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<sup>17</sup> Freud discusses the *unheimlich* (translated into English as the uncanny) in *Das Unheimliche* (1919). Bearing in mind the etymology of *heim*, meaning home, *heimlich* signifies that which we find comfortable, familiar or safe. In this instance the coffee shop in which Poe's protagonist sits is a familiar, safe environment. He is separated from the *unheimlich* (the uncanny, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, foreign) by the glass window. Kristeva, draws upon this idea in *Strangers to Ourselves*: "With Freud indeed, foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself...Henceforth, we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others." Kristeva 170.

<sup>18</sup> Amongst others, Chris Jenks argues that the flâneur must be "one flesh" with the crowd, thus making Poe's protagonist "no flâneur". Jenks, "Watching your Step," 128.

the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to the bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done.<sup>19</sup>

The streets become a dwelling for the Parisian flâneur as a matter of choice. A day would be spent outdoors, observing urban life followed by a return to his household. However, the Times Square homeless/transient, in the majority of cases, has no choice other than to be on the streets of the city on a twenty-four hour basis. For Huncke and Wojnarowicz, the streets literally become a dwelling, the walls of the buildings are the desks against which they press *their* notebooks. Both writers discuss the manner in which their situation forces them to wander and to watch. During the winter, wandering becomes a necessity as a method of keeping warm. Similarly, people watching is obligatory when the individual lives in and around the ever bustling Times Square and has no private space to which he can retreat, apart from perhaps the infamous cafeterias which were scattered around the area such as Bickford's or Horn and Hardart Automat.<sup>20</sup>

### **Café vs. Cafeteria**

William Burroughs wrote that "not only did they have very good food...and very cheap, but they were all meeting places, you had to be careful the manager didn't spot it. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Bickford's was a notorious hang-out for thieves and pimps and whores and fags and buyers and everything."<sup>21</sup> Bickford's was the principal 'hang-out'

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 43.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Sillen chronicles the decline of the Times Square lunch counters as a result of gentrification in his short film *Grand Luncheonette* (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Burroughs qtd. in Morgan 23



to which the 'night people' retreated. In *Lonesome Traveller*, Kerouac described the cafeteria as the greatest stage on Times Square. Huncke was a particularly keen viewer, known to spend up to eighteen hours a day at his favourite window seat. This activity is particularly reminiscent of the nineteenth century Baudelairean or Poeian flâneur. As the Parisian prowler frequented the arcades of the city and took his vantage point from the chic pavement cafes, Huncke takes up his own voyeuristic position in the window of the grubby 42<sup>nd</sup> Street cafeterias. We imagine the Parisian flâneur, or 'idle man about town' to be a decadent, immaculately dressed man, something which Huncke, of course, is not. However, both men, for their own reasons, take to 'botanising on the asphalt'. For the nineteenth century flâneur, people watching is a sport or pastime, a cure for his boredom. For Huncke, people watching and 'cafeteria dwelling' is somewhat more obligatory due to the fact that he lives in the public space. Huncke along with the countless other Times Square homeless frequented the cafeterias primarily for food, shelter and respite from the streets. Horn & Hardart for instance, at 250 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, provided the cheapest food in the city. The Times Square hustler could buy the likes of macaroni and cheese or baked beans and bacon for a nickel at any time of the day or night. He could then sit for long periods of time in the automat, without being rushed to leave. Studying passers-by and those seated around him not only provided entertainment, but an opportunity to spot potential prey. The cafeterias were useful places to frequent to learn of new scams, or to hatch scams with other likeminded individuals. In *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson*, Huncke refers to the cafeterias, "Bickfords, Chase, Hectors, The Automat" as "places of business and pleasure." As Huncke became 'trusted' on the street he became acquainted with other men, like himself, who lived "by their wit". These men

were usually thieves who had become professionals in their 'street' trade.

"pickpockets – boosters – muggers – a few stickup men – burglars – and automobile hustlers" (*Evening Sun*, 45).

### **Alienation and Invisibility**

In terms of alienation and invisibility the homeless writer is placed in a comparable position to that of the nineteenth century flâneur. In earlier chapters of this study, the transposition of the Parisian flâneur to New York highlighted the wanderer's loss of invisibility. In the American metropolis the flâneur is both visible and, in turn, vulnerable. Both Huncke and Wojnarowicz address issues of willed and unwilled invisibility on the street. Urban trampdom was not recognised in New York City until the late 1870s. Nevertheless, early nineteenth century Manhattan was famed for its drifters. These individuals did not necessarily fit into the mould of what would now be classed as tramps. Trampdom in early nineteenth century America was very much a rural phenomenon. Whereas rural tramps were thought to wander romantically through the countryside by choice, urban drifters were forced into their sad existence by varying factors, as Sante reveals:

The luckless, the unconnected, the newly arrived who had no relatives and no command of the language, the destitute, those afflicted with illness, those made pariahs by sores or other disfigurements, those made insane by war or prison or more personal horrors, alcoholics of varying severity, misdiagnosed epileptics, the retarded, the brain-damaged, victims of all sorts of imaginable or unimaginable circumstances, the anchorites, the refusers, the resisters, the outcasts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Sante 313.

In terms of invisibility Huncke and Wojnarowicz join a long line of transients who gravitated towards New York City. Sante goes on to reveal that at this moment in New York's history drifters "partook of an invisibility to the general public. They lived in a silence that broached the supernatural and might be seen as omens, as memento mori, as demons, as damned souls, as spectres and walking reproaches."<sup>23</sup> With regard to Sante's description, the 'otherness' of the drifter is blatantly obvious. Sante not only underlines that the drifter was set apart due to physical or mental abnormalities, addiction, or troubled circumstances, but suggests that these people were almost thought to inhabit a lower spiritual plane, a sinister invisible city within the city. They were 'unseen' yet they were ever present, human yet considered sub human, or even inhuman - denoted as evil spectres of the upstanding citizens of New York. On the streets, both Huncke and Wojnarowicz take on this same social invisibility. The passer-by is aware of their presence, but does not wish to acknowledge it. Like the Parisian flâneur the Times Square hustler's relationship with the city is one of estrangement. He is part of the crowd, yet apart from it.

In his essay "Desert Spectacular," Zygmunt Bauman states that the flâneur "needs to preserve the elbow room of the 'man of leisure' while sunk in the crowd, he must see without being seen."<sup>24</sup> We have already established that the Times Square hustler has "elbow room" whilst "sunk in the crowd" and that he sees without being seen. Yet can we label him as a 'man of leisure'? Whereas the Baudelairean flâneur had time to wander the streets due to the fact that he had no financial obligations, writers such as Huncke and Wojnarowicz are destitute on the streets of New York.

<sup>23</sup> Sante 315.

<sup>24</sup> Bauman 141.

The obvious correspondence is that neither have jobs, the Baudelairean flâneur because he does not have to work, the homeless wanderer because he can't, or indeed does not want to find work. Regardless of wealth, both exist outside of the obligations of the 'nine to five' shift, giving them both the required distance to critique mainstream society as well as making them suspect in the eyes of 'normal' citizens.

Of course, their motives for being on the street vary significantly. The Parisian flâneur is documented lazily strolling the arcades with top hat, tails and cane, whilst the Times Square hustler struggles to survive. Where the Parisian flâneur took down notes about his surroundings, the hustler in turn becomes 'street smart', building up an intricate knowledge of the street and its inhabitants. The Times Square hustler is clearly no 'man of leisure'. Nevertheless, the activities in which he partakes in order to make money (namely prostitution and drug dealing) can also be likened to the act of flânerie, as both Huncke and Wojnarowicz illustrate.

Sitting in 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Times Square cafeterias, postwar authors found themselves in the same position to that of the protagonist in "Man of the Crowd": fascinated by the criminal underworld but unable to infiltrate their world.<sup>25</sup> Huncke

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<sup>25</sup> In Kerouac's *The Town and the City*, the character Leon Levinsky reveals in an outburst, "everybody is going to fall apart, disintegrate, all character structures based on tradition and uprightness and so-called morality will slowly rot away, people will get the hives in their hearts, great crabs will cling to their brains" Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (New York: Universal Library edition, 1959) 68. Levinsky, a thinly disguised Allen Ginsberg, refers to the Beat's fascination and subsequent involvement with the criminal underworld which frequented Time Square and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Ginsberg's street education began at the age of eighteen after his suspension from Columbia. As Miles states "as long as he attended Columbia, his *nostalgie de la boue* [nostalgia for the gutter] was held in check by the authority of the English department and its celebrated professors. Now that he was out on his own, he looked for new teachers, and naturally turned to William Burroughs" (Miles 62). Burroughs had already developed a knowledge of the Manhattan underclass, having conducted his own study of Eighth Avenue bars. This in turn had given him a superficial insight into the criminal underworld, namely petty criminals that worked at street level. His initial entry point into the underworld was, however, Bob Brandenburg, a wannabe mobster who worked as a soda jerk in a drugstore near Columbia. Burroughs befriended Brandenburg partly because he was fascinated by his tales of the Manhattan crime scene and partly because he was researching material for his forthcoming novel. It was through Brandenburg that Burroughs and subsequently Ginsberg and Kerouac, were introduced to Huncke.

was an acquaintance of William Burroughs, who in turn introduced him to Kerouac and Ginsberg. Huncke offered the young, naïve<sup>26</sup> Beats access to the criminal underworld, revealing to them a wealth of esoteric knowledge concerning life on the city's streets. Jerome Poynton states in his biographical sketch of Huncke that "he was always in the midst of life's con – busy pulling innocent listeners in – holding their cars – sounding for the depths of their souls – and their wallets if necessary" (Poynton qtd. in *H. Reader*, XXIV). Huncke's bar room anecdotes may have stretched the facts, his storytelling nevertheless led to him being mythologized by the Beats, who probably preferred the tell-tale to the sordid truth.<sup>27</sup>

Huncke's street education began in his early teens. In *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* he refers to the "many man nights" spent "wandering through the [Chicago] city streets and parks and along the lake front finally resting atop a stone piling...watching the sun rise."<sup>28</sup> Huncke's use of the term "man nights" hints at the way in which walking the city streets at an early age rapidly matured him, making him a man before his time. It also implicitly links time on the street to labour, reminiscent of the term, 'man-hours,' the amount of time worked by an employee. In many respects his time spent involved in criminal activity on the streets is his 'work', or means of income. This in turn correlates with his initial perception of Kerouac and

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<sup>26</sup> Huncke was struck by Kerouac's and Ginsberg's naivety. In *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac*, Huncke reveals that "Kerouac looked like a typical, clean cut young college boy. He was as green, obviously, as the day is long. His eyes were flashing around...You would have thought he was about sixteen or seventeen" (Gifford and Lee 64). Similarly, upon his first meeting with Ginsberg in the Angle Bar, Huncke states: "Allen was really a starry eyed kid then. You can't believe the sort of angelic expression of his face. He was really a child." (Gifford and Lee 65). Neither men would have appreciated being called "green" or "childish," especially Kerouac who, having made Lowell his 'town', was trying to make New York his 'city'. Nevertheless, in comparison to Huncke neither writer could be deemed to have a true knowledge of the streets.

<sup>27</sup> Huncke was the inspiration for the character "Junkie" in Kerouac's, *The Town and the City*. Elmo Hassel in *On the Road* and Huck in *Book of Dreams and Visions of Cody*. Huncke also features as "Herman" in William Burroughs' novel *Junkie*.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert Huncke, *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* (New York: Cherry Valley, 1980) 17.

Ginsberg, who he looked upon as kids, rather than street-smart men as he himself had become. Huncke goes on to reveal that his ‘street education’ was bestowed upon him via his involvement with other Chicagoan ‘night people’:

I had adventures and strange experiences – becoming frequently involved with other night people. I learned much about sex and about the vast number of people who make up the so-called less desirable element in our American way of life. Haunted people – lonely people – misfits – outcasts – wanderers – those on the skids – drunkards – deviates of all kinds – hustlers of every description – male and female – old people and young people – and they came from every section of the country. (*Evening Sun*, 17)

In this passage the word ‘people’ echoes again and again. In his introduction to *The Waterfront Journals*, Kushner reminds us that “many of us secretly regard [the inhabitants of the shadow city] as less than fully human” (*Waterfront*, xi). Huncke’s repetition of the word ‘people’ serves to reinstate the humanity of the night people, each having their own individual reason for being excluded. Huncke does not deny that they are considered by most to be the “less desirable element in our American way of life,” yet he also acknowledges the fact that most of the “night people” are not living on the streets due to their own choice but that certain factors have pushed them to live on the fringes of society. They are, as Sante puts it, the “marginal, the ignored, the suppressed, the unacknowledged.” They are the unwanted excess or by-product of American capitalism.

Ginsberg has written that “the whole stage scenery of Moloch’s altar – Time, Life, Fortune, Pentagon, Madison Avenue, Wall Street, Treasury

Department... Wrigley Building & all shuddered evanescent in sunset... when Herbert E. Huncke's consciousness was opened," (*Evening Sun*, 7) echoing "Howl".<sup>29</sup>

Moloch's altar refers to the urban power of capitalist America, the "stage scenery" through which Huncke walks. Moloch's altar towers above Huncke, he is dwarfed by the huge fluorescent billboards of Times Square, the imposing architecture of Wall Street, the department stores of Madison Avenue, all of which are monuments to the almighty dollar. The plight of the 'spectral,' impoverished 'night people' seems somewhat insignificant in a city devoted to the 'genius' of mass production and consumption. Ginsberg describes Huncke as a "familiar stranger hustling around Times Square 42nd Street New York, so Alien in fact that the police themselves banned him from the street as a Creep." (*Evening Sun*, 7)

As we study Huncke's work more carefully we can understand how Huncke is 'Alien' to (and alienated by) American society. We learn how he is alien to capitalism itself, preferring to steal and utilize the black market rather than work for a living and choosing to live on the streets or in friends' 'digs' as a refusal of a 'normal' domestic existence. Yet Huncke and Wojnarowicz's work is important in the sense that the "speaking floor", as Kushner puts it, is "given over to those who seldom had a chance to speak to the listening audience" (Kushner qtd. in *Waterfront*, xiii). Whereas "most who took up the Beat subject of the urban underworld of the erotic, the intoxicated, the illegal took it up in William Burroughs amoral vein, more interested in its coolness than its consequences or its politics."<sup>30</sup> Huncke and Wojnarowicz describe

<sup>29</sup> Ginsberg's reference to "The whole stage scenery of Moloch's altar," echoes part two of "Howl," where he states "Moloch, whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! [...] whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities! [...] whose poverty is the spectre of genius!" Ginsberg, *Selected Poems* 54.

<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2001) 192.

the harsh reality of being (as the publication of Wojnarowicz's diaries is aptly entitled) *In the Shadow of the American Dream*.

### “Pervert Park”<sup>31</sup>

“Bryant Park” (c.1946) is among the earliest of Huncke's known writings, in which he uncharacteristically adopts the third person narrative voice. In this short story, we immediately recognise Huncke's interest in how the city changes as dusk falls. The story begins in a rush of movement: “The afternoon began closing. Huge buildings spewing forth office workers who rushed madly across streets, around corners – down subway entrances...into restaurants and stores and homes.”<sup>32</sup> The narrator observes this almost theatrical movement from a point of stillness. He has no home to go to, no money to spend in restaurants or stores. The crowd rushes around him, in what appears to be an almost panic stricken attempt to seek safety indoors before nightfall arrives. As the delicate “saffron and pink and purple” of the sunset fades, “phantom cascades” of grey shadows appear, “the lurid reds, greens and blues of neon become bolder as the thin pall of darkness gathers” (*H. Reader*, 305). The words that Huncke uses to describe the onset of night mirror those used by Sante earlier in this chapter. The word “phantom” again gives the night a deathly, supernatural quality, as does the “thin pall” of darkness. Nightfall is depicted as *paranormal* in comparison to the normality of daytime. Once again we encounter the idea that there is a sway of power towards night and all those who inhabit it: “Night sounds began ascension, Automobile horns, screeching brakes...vibrations of last

<sup>31</sup> In pre-Stonewall *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs dismisses urban American parks where gay men gathered as being “pervert parks”. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961) 92.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Huncke, “Bryant Park,” *The Herbert Huncke Reader*, ed. Benjamin G. Schafer (London: Bloomsbury, 1998) 305.



minute suggestions of activity dependant on caution and secrecy" (*H. Reader*, 305).

Night sounds begin to drown out those made during the day, and these sounds are all associated with wild abandonment rather than decorum. The loud noise, car horns, the screech of brakes, all express an intimidating aggression. They are intended to intimidate. Yet, those sounds which are barely audible are perhaps more disturbing: the whispers of sedition. Even the sound of footsteps becomes transformed at night:

"New footsteps – unheard during the brightness of day - also crept into

being...Footfalls becoming less strident and of a slower tempo, intermingling

with...hurry" (*H. Reader*, 305). It is almost as if the act of walking itself becomes

radically altered at night. This passage conjures up the image of two sets of people,

predators and absconders. Although Huncke does not use the word "crept" to describe

directly a method of walking, we are still led to believe that the night people walk

stealthily, they 'creep'. This form of movement has an implied threat. An individual

creeps when he or she does not want to draw attention to him or herself. Before

striking, the stalker creeps, as does the mugger and burglar. The other noise of

footsteps to be heard is that of hurried movement - the sound of escape. Layer upon

layer of noises fill Huncke's nightfall, each of them associated with wrongdoing. As

darkness begins to take hold the night people appear in their droves:

White faces with large brown eyes hinting at having seen sights of wild

description – or of death and tragedy – of weariness and defeat. Of

cunning and treachery. Of suffering and malnutrition. Of broken minds

and sore infested souls...searchers thread the course of street corners,

urinals, crowded sections, theatres and streets where the pulse beat is

one of sex and great awareness of it. Sex is the great pounding and sounding and rumbling of universal transition. (*H. Reader*, 306)

The “universal transition” from day to night, draws out those who are reluctant to show their faces during daylight hours. Their eyes tell of the brutal scenes they have witnessed, or taken part in. Some of the words Huncke uses to describe the inhabitants of the ‘shadow city’ inspire our pity, “death”, “tragedy”, “weariness”, and “defeat”. We understand that life has left an indelible mark on these people; that torturous past events have led them to wander the city streets after dark. However, there is also a distinct air of deviancy. Huncke indicates that at night the city begins to exude a throbbing erotic rhythm which draws individuals onto the streets in search of sexual activity. This in many respects echoes Kerouac’s, Vivaldo’s and Ginsberg’s nocturnal tourism in the previous two chapters, each of whom is a searcher in one form or another. Huncke has more of a kinship with Rufus in Baldwin’s *Another Country*, in the sense that at nightfall he watches the searchers arrive in the public space in which he lives. Unlike Rufus, who whilst on the streets of Harlem was *preyed upon* by sexual tourists, Huncke is much more of an opportunist, willing to do whatever he can to procure money.

In “Bryant Park,” Kurt, a character which Huncke based heavily upon himself, tours the Times Square area (“the most surging and active spots of civilisation”) in search of a trick. As Huncke points out, at nineteen Kurt was “healthy young and virile,” which in one way or another set him apart from many of the other hustlers. He “anticipated making use of his appearance for financial gain before the night grew much older” (*H. Reader*, 307). This was of course how Huncke himself began to make money when he first arrived in New York. Kurt encircles “[Bryant] park to see who

might be there he knew and perhaps could get to know, before reaching the rear again" (*H. Reader*, 306). Kurt fails to find a trick, yet whilst being led around the park we are offered a series of tableaux: winos, passers by and other hustlers with whom Kurt "had gotten blind drunk and knocked out cold on Nembutals, Seconals and marijuana." "Bryant Park" serves as a useful introduction into Huncke's world. We gain a geographic sense of both Huncke's, and later Wojnarowicz's, territory and a sense of the sexual culture. The neon lights of Times Square are contrasted by the "aura of rest and quiet" (*H. Reader*, 306) of Bryant Park to the rear of the public library where the seedy theatres of Forty-second Street intersect with Fifth Avenue.

In *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, geographer Jane Jacobs cites urban parks as being important areas of 'contact'<sup>33</sup> between the city's inhabitants. 'Contact' for Jacobs ranges from the formation of block associations, as discussed in the next chapter, to a casual nod between neighbours whilst passing in the street. For Jacobs, 'contact' is essential in creating a safe urban environment. As Samuel R. Delany rightly points out, "Jacobs mentions neither casual sex nor public sexual relations as part of contact – presumably because she was writing at a time when such things were not talked of or analysed as elements contributing to an overall pleasurable social fabric."<sup>34</sup> Delany goes on to argue that:

...if every sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house, the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety filled, class-bound, and choosy. This is precisely why public restrooms, peep shows, sex movies, bars with grope rooms, and parks with enough

<sup>33</sup> Jacobs 74-111.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999) 125

greenery are necessary for a relaxed and friendly sexual atmosphere in a democratic metropolis.<sup>35</sup>

For Jacobs, 'contact' can be equated with community, whereas for Delany 'contact' has the potential to be a fleeting sexual encounter. What is perhaps most interesting about Delany's argument is the manner in which he cites the park as a location for inter-class communication. The park becomes a binary opposite of the square.

Obvious oppositions include the neon light of Times Square versus the darkness of Bryant Park, open space versus dense foliage and the organic versus the inorganic. There is little contact between the classes in the square itself, exemplified by the manner in which passing workers overlook the homeless. Even in terms of sexual tourism, there is minimal communication between hustler and john in Times Square itself.<sup>36</sup> The grid provides few *public* hiding places, the streets offer a clear line of vision for the walker, alleys and doorways providing only partial concealment. The park space, however, is rather more difficult to police. Even though it is imbedded within the rigid grid of Midtown, at 42<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, it provides seclusion. The walker's line of vision becomes significantly reduced when entering the park space. Trees and bushes screen activity occurring even at close proximity. The city's attempts to impose order in Bryant Park are of course prominent, such as KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs,<sup>37</sup> yet it is clearly more difficult and time consuming for a police officer to hunt through dense foliage than patrol streets and avenues. The park space (specifically at night) appears in many respects as a transitional or liminal space

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<sup>35</sup> Delany 126.

<sup>36</sup> In "Times Square Blue" Delany discusses the subtle exchange between hustler and john. "if you look in his direction long enough, and no cops around [he] might reach between the legs of his baggy jeans and casually squeeze his crotch in a way that could mean that he is just scratching, but also shows what's under the denim." Delany 10.

<sup>37</sup> Huncke famously used one of the KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs from Bryant Park to break a car windshield so that he could steal a suitcase and overcoat.

within the city. The seclusion of the park offers 'cover' for an array of 'deviant' activities partitioned from the conventions and moral codes of everyday life.

Sante hinted earlier at Central Park offering a liminality throughout its existence. In the early 1900's, the park attracted the aforementioned drifters, marginalized groups rejected by society for a multitude of reasons. Over the course of the next century it became notorious as a no-go area within the city, especially at night. A haunt for both the homeless and drug addicts, the park became a site for a string of infamous violent crimes: the 'Zodiac Shooter', the 'Central Park Pianist'<sup>38</sup> and the gang rape of the 'Central Park Jogger,' Trisha Meili. This incident in particular lead to the first recorded use of the term 'wilding'.<sup>39</sup> The parks themselves are clearly a locale where citizens recognise the opportunity to go 'wild' to varying degrees. To an extent, the existence of what Jacobs refers to as 'pervert parks,' can be viewed as a safety valve offering momentary relief from the pressures and constraints of the given system.

In "Times Square Blue" Delany recognises fleeting homosexual interclass sexual contact as a mode of breaking down boundaries within the cityplace. Eric F. Rofes agrees that:

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<sup>38</sup> The 'Zodiac Shooter' preyed on homeless in Central Park leaving "astrological signs at the crime scene." The 'Central Park Pianist' was found in the park on July 4, 1996, "her face too battered to recognise". Drifter John Royson "confessed to attacking the pianist. He was later found guilty of attacking three other women and murdering a fourth." Other notable crimes include the killing of 39-year-old Susan Fuchs on July 22, 1999 by Orlando Rodriguez. Rodriguez left Fuch's body in "a wooded area, her head bashed so severely that police could not immediately discern her hair color. She was stripped almost bare and had been sexually assaulted." An investigator working on the 'Zodiac Shooter' case commented that "few crimes get more attention than ones that happen in Central Park." Steve Irsay, "Infamous Crimes in Central Park," *Court TV Online* 19 Dec 2002 <[http://news.findlaw.com/court\\_tv/s.20021219/19dec2002150737.html](http://news.findlaw.com/court_tv/s.20021219/19dec2002150737.html)>.

<sup>39</sup> "Wilding," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1999 ed.

"Wilding, n. The action or practice by a gang of youths of going on a protracted and violent rampage in a street, park, or other public place, attacking or mugging people at random along the way."

Delany shows that before the current regime of yuppification, sex was one of the primary modes of interclass contact, especially between men. In the backrooms and tearooms and amid the theater seats, sperm trumped social standing; penis vanquished pedigree. The narrow focus on pleasure—and on what Delany sees as the democratic traffic in pleasure in the Times Squares of the world—afforded its participants opportunities to cut themselves momentarily free from the constraints of a culture stratified by social class and breeding. A culture emerged, concerned as much with sociality as with sexuality, whose members could exchange pleasure with or without exchanging names.<sup>40</sup>

Both Delany and Rofes attribute the phenomenon of 'sperm trumping social standing' not just to paid homosexual relations<sup>41</sup> between hustler and john, but to all gay sexual activity in and around the pre-gentrified Times Square area. For the hustler, Bryant Park is one of the few outdoor public spaces where this form of 'contact' is made. Can we therefore see the park as being a territory which is free from the constraints of class? If so, what bearing does the hustler's move from the street to the park have on his identity?

Rofes goes on to state that "we rarely want to visit one another's neighborhoods. Class and race distinctions may drive erotic fantasies—consider the pages of *Hustler*, *On Our Backs*, or *Bear*—but outside the sex industry few seek out real-time sexual adventures across class or race lines."<sup>42</sup> As with sexual tourists such

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<sup>40</sup> Eric Rofes, "Imperial New York: Destruction and Disneyfication under Emperor Giuliani," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 7.1 (1998): 104.

<sup>41</sup> Delany asserts that hustling attributed for only a small percentage of homosexual activity in Times Square.

<sup>42</sup> Rofes 105.

as Kerouac and Vivaldo discussed in chapter two, the Times Square john also operates “across class and often race lines.” Whereas the majority of passersby of a higher socio-economic standing than the hustler would overlook him, the Times Square john actively seeks out the poor who are visibly selling their bodies on the street. In terms of contact, Huncke states that “there is something magnetic about attractions [between hustler and john]. Something beyond any conscious acuteness affects the relationship between the two parts instantaneously upon recognition of one another...The two complete an urge” (*H. Reader*, 308). For Huncke, the walk from the street to the park with his john is motivated by money and desire. Yet he also echoes Delany and Rofes in so much as he sees sex as “the great pounding and sounding and rumbling of universal transition” (*H. Reader*, 306). Huncke fails to state what exactly this transition is, or indeed how it occurs. However, the sexual act which takes place in the park or tearoom is seen as empowering. Huncke sees the john as a “searcher,” but also someone who moves in what he calls “positive sexual consciousness,” particularly at night.

Huncke’s early description of the john in “Bryant Park” differs from that which we encounter in *Another Country*, *Lonesome Traveler* or as discussed in the following chapter in reference to *Girls Visions and Everything* and *American Psycho*. In each of these novels the john is seen as a predator, and in Bateman’s case particularly, he strips his victims of their identity. Yet taking part in what Rofes refers to as “the democratic traffic in pleasure” in Times Square appears to blur identities, to promote inter-class communication and to push against societal norms. In *Guilty of Everything*, Huncke later admits that on arrival in Manhattan, “I didn’t see all the tinsel and tawdriness about it back then, and it took me a while to finally detect the

horror of the surroundings" (*H. Reader*, 240). Delany's and Royes' romanticized vision of the pre-gentrified Times Square should be treated with similar skepticism as Kerouac's romanticisation of the ghetto, examined earlier. In "Times Square Blue," Delany forges personal anecdote with social and cultural exegesis. He may develop an intimate knowledge of the square and its inhabitants, yet like Kerouac, he still has the ability to retreat to his office or home, an option that the hustlers he encounters do not have. The generation of inter-class communication in Times Square via sexual 'contact' by no means rules out the possibility of exploitation, as discussed later with reference to Wojnarowicz.

### **A Dual Citizenship: Policing the Shadow City**

Throughout Huncke's work, police presence is a constant preoccupation. The police are seen in direct opposition to the 'night people'. As Kushner points out at the beginning of Wojnarowicz's *Waterfront Journals*, "Only the police hold a dual citizenship" for both the city and 'shadow city'. "Only the police can cross the border and come back again" (*Waterfront*, xi). The police are similar to the 'night people' in the sense that they re-enact the night peoples' movements in order to enforce the law, as examined in the following chapter of this study in relation to *Girls, Visions and Everything*. In a short chapter entitled "Cruiser on Avenue B," Huncke recalls one of a number of occasions when he was followed and subsequently picked up by a patrol car. The paranoia Huncke displays in the chapter correlates closely with Vivaldo's fear of the "prowl car" in Baldwin's *Another Country*. Admittedly, the two men are on the street for different reasons. As discussed in chapter one Vivaldo is trawling the streets of uptown Manhattan for prostitutes, whereas Huncke is an opportunist, as well as a drug pusher and addict. Nevertheless, both men have to *display* themselves on the



street in order to accomplish their respective goals. If Vivaldo intends to 'pick up' in Harlem he must reveal to the street girls that he is a 'john.' Similarly, if Huncke intends to push drugs, he must reveal to the addicts that he is a pusher. Yet simultaneously, both men are required to *hide* their criminal intentions from those policing the area. The "prowl car" or "cruiser" is therefore a constant threat. Its presence is the immediate indication to the likes of Vivaldo and Huncke that they must switch from displaying to concealing their intentions on the street.

The terms '*prowl* car' and 'cruiser' are interesting in their own right. The use of the word 'prowl' conjures up images of Baudelaire's nineteenth century *Parisian Prowler*, whereas the word 'cruiser' could easily be applied to either Ginsberg or O'Hara whose flâneurian outings are in part an attempt to attract and pick up men. The police patrol car officer is of course comparable to the flâneur in so much as both are involved in the act of watching the city while in seemingly aimless motion. The flâneur watches for desirable imagery, whereas the police officer(s) manning the patrol car watch for criminals or the occurrence of criminal acts. One of the most striking aspects of the following extract from "Cruiser on Avenue B," is the manner in which Huncke and the officers in the police cruiser watch one another prior to the arrest:

I had known almost positively they were interested in me upon my first becoming aware of their presence. Suddenly glancing to the side whilst walking slowly along Avenue B at the time my attention somewhat abstractedly drew toward the entranceway of the Charles Theatre or movie house, just beneath the marquee so that there was an element of surprise. As I watched, still strolling, their obvious interest in me -- and

there could be no doubt – the officer behind the wheel, the driver was speaking of me. As he half turned his head toward his companion and continued slowly moving along side me, while by then, disconcerted by their intrusion I was inwardly attempting to appear nonchalant and not in the least troubled by any interest the police could have in my most ordinary life and dull spotless course of daily existence...I ventured another glance in their direction. After all, I've almost as much right to look at them as they have to observe me (*Evening Sun*, 150).

This passage highlights the criminal's vulnerability on the empty streets. In bustling Times Square Huncke can disappear into a crowd. In Bryant Park he is partially obscured by the foliage. Yet on the deserted Avenue B Huncke is exposed. The police officers move in stealthily on Huncke, observing him for an unknown period of time *before* he is aware of their presence. During this time, Huncke's attention has been drawn away from what is happening around him on the street by an undisclosed interest in the façade of the Charles Theatre. This incident alone demonstrates how important it is for a man such as Huncke to constantly scan his surroundings for a potential threat. If he had spotted the cruiser before it had spotted him, he could have taken steps to avoid confrontation.

The officer's attempts at reading the individual are similar to those of the flâneur. Fragments of information are processed in order to establish the character of the potential felon. Huncke's visual representation (clothes, appearance and body movement) is key in determining whether or not he is a criminal. The officers are obviously attracted by Huncke's appearance. Somewhat ironically, Huncke muses as to why they should be interested in his "most ordinary life and dull spotless course of

daily existence.” However, we are already aware that his life is far from “ordinary.” It is with a sad irony we learn that in reality Huncke walks the “misty grey early morning” streets with drained skin dotted with sores “like rouge spots”. Far from being “spotless”, the sores on his face along with his eyes, “near sighted pools of dilation,” are an immediate indication of his illegal involvement in narcotics. Whilst his facial sores are signs of long-term drug use, his dilated pupils indicate that he is stoned at the moment the officers spot him on the street. Furthermore, Huncke’s paranoia begins to grow as he considers the possibility that he may have something illegal on his person. His mind races as he checks thorough his pockets. Huncke’s suspicious actions and unhealthy appearance lead to his arrest. He is a detectable criminal at street level, unlike Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* whose psychotic activities go unnoticed due to his ‘respectable’ appearance, discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Whilst questioning Huncke on the street, observation appears crucial to both parties. One of the officers continues to eye Huncke suspiciously: “he looked me up and down, his eyes stopping as they reached mine and I could feel his search for an indication I was a drug user” (*Evening Sun*, 151). Similarly, Huncke uses this time to weigh up the officer: “he was a young man in his late twenties or early thirties; I’d guess about 32 years of age. His facial features were inoffensive although he bore a stern and mean demeanour. His expression was full of surprise and hostility” (*Evening Sun*, 151). The police scrutinize Huncke, searching for a concrete motive for making an arrest. Huncke, meanwhile studies the officers, in an attempt not only to gauge their reaction to him, but to search for a sliver of weakness in their surly demeanours which he can take advantage of in order to escape being searched or arrested.

The officers then ask Huncke if he had just handed something over to the man he had spoken with “back up the street”. Huncke admits “I immediately denied any knowledge of what he was talking about, and then I did recall stopping to speak with Victor, to whom I had handed a slip of paper with an address and telephone number written on it” (*Evening Sun*, 151). This information, which was omitted by Huncke at the beginning of the chapter, alters the context of the situation completely. Initially we were under the impression that Huncke was walking *without* intent. The implication was that he was taking an early morning walk, and even though he appeared stoned, there was little motive for the officers’ “intrusion”. We felt that he had been stopped and questioned solely because the police had become suspicious of a dishevelled looking man walking alone in the early hours of the morning. Yet Huncke’s failure to inform the reader of his ‘meeting’ and subsequent ‘exchange’ on the street is reason for us to question his honesty. Was Huncke’s intention to merely pass on a “slip of paper” with an address or telephone number on it, or was the rendezvous arranged for one of the men to supply the other with drugs?<sup>43</sup>

A Foucauldian reading of Huncke’s encounter proves revealing. Robert Castel’s interpretation of Foucault’s lecture on Governmentality, “From Dangerousness to Risk,” is particularly useful when applied to the policing and surveillance of New York’s excluded others. Castel acknowledges the Foucauldian premise that the incarceration of large numbers of the population on the basis that they

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<sup>43</sup> Alphabet City was notorious for its open air drug markets particularly during the latter half of the twentieth century. Between 1984 and 1987 The NDRI (Narcotic and Drug Research Inc.) set up a series of ethnographic field stations in the area in order to study the drug using micro-communities. Open air drug markets and nearby shooting galleries were the prime focus of the study. Paul J. Goldstein et al., “Ethnographic Field Stations,” *The Collection of Data from Hidden Populations*, ed. Elizabeth Lambert (1990): 87-102.

have a high potential to transgress is impossible.<sup>44</sup> In response to this, Castel states that: “public authorities undertake a special surveillance of those population groups...termed ‘populations at risk’, those located (of course) at the bottom of the social ladder.”<sup>45</sup> Castel directs his argument specifically towards those suffering from mental illness, although his theories can be broadened to include a wider spectrum of urban ‘otherness’.

A specialist reading of the street is central to the surveillance and control of the city’s marginalized communities. Castel draws attention to “systematic predetection,” the intention of which is that of “anticipating and preventing the emergence of some undesirable event: illness, abnormality, deviant behaviour, etc.”<sup>46</sup> With regards to ‘systematic predetection’, the act of surveillance focuses not on the behaviour of individual subjects, but “factors, statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements.”<sup>47</sup> Castel continues, “to be suspected, it is no longer necessary to manifest symptoms of dangerousness or abnormality, it is enough to display whatever characteristics the specialists responsible for the definition of preventative policy have constituted as risk factors.”<sup>48</sup>

With regards to Huncke being tailed and questioned by the police, in terms of this model of surveillance, he does not need to demonstrate ‘dangerousness’ in order to arouse the suspicion of the police. Huncke merely has to fall into a specific taxonomic category which the authorities have placed under scrutiny. Furthermore,

Castel explores the relationship between the practitioner and administrator of

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Castel, “From Dangerousness to Risk,” *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 284.

<sup>45</sup> Castel 284.

<sup>46</sup> Castel 288.

<sup>47</sup> Castel 288.

<sup>48</sup> Castel 288.

authority, specifically the manner in which the “practitioners are made completely subordinate to objectives of management policy.”<sup>49</sup> When applied to the street, the police (or practitioners of authority) are revealed not to be acting on their own power of judgement regarding the surveillance of individual threat, but targeting specific social groups as directed by their superiors. Being a member of the city’s underclass, the police target Huncke not because he is acting suspiciously but because he has been marked out as a member of a group who has the potential to be dangerous or weak willed. Castel refers to this phenomenon as a push toward a “hygienist utopia,”<sup>50</sup> whereby the subproletariat becomes the focus of a witch-hunt, with the ultimate intention of eradicating all forms of social ‘otherness’ or undesirability. Evidence of the emergence of this “hygienist utopia” comes in the form of the sanitization of Times Square, discussed later, or the wider process of gentrification in Manhattan, examined in the following chapter.

Castel’s reference to the model of a ‘dual’ or ‘two-speed’ society, “the coexistence of hyper-competitive sectors obedient to the harshest requirements of economic rationality, and marginal activities that provide a refuge (or dump) for those unable to take part in the circuits of exchange,”<sup>51</sup> can be applied directly to twentieth century Manhattan. Huncke and Wojnarowicz’s position can be read as the “marginalization of the unprofitable.”<sup>52</sup> They do not contribute to the social body and are therefore viewed as potential pollutants which must be monitored, if not expelled.

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<sup>49</sup> Castel 293.

<sup>50</sup> Castel 289.

<sup>51</sup> Castel 294.

<sup>52</sup> Castel 294.

Ginsberg's statement in "Howl": "Moloch the incomprehensible prison,"<sup>53</sup> rings true. Although Huncke and Wojnarowicz are not *literally* incarcerated, the social strata to which they belong remains under constant surveillance, as in the Panopticon. Bateman is read as belonging to the higher order of the 'dual' society; he therefore moves freely and undetected due to the fact that "the specialists responsible for the definition of preventative policy" have not designated the social class to which he belongs as a potential threat. The actions of Huncke and Wojnarowicz as members of the underclass are, in comparison, highly limited.

### **Gentrification, the Outlaw and Urban Freedom**

In a section of *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* entitled "Tattooed Woman" Huncke explores the area six blocks north of the Chelsea Hotel, highlighting the fact that the police cruiser is not the only threat to his freedom of movement within the city:

I had walked partway up the block on Twenty-ninth Street between Eight and Ninth Avenues-thinking how strange-unlike New York-this whole scene. The feeling of space was what made the difference. The entire area below Twenty-ninth Street, as far down as perhaps Twenty-seventh Street, from Eighth Avenue to Tenth or Eleventh Avenue, is wide open where buildings have been torn down leaving only rubble. It is as though a great iron claw had reached down from the sky squeezing, picking, laying flat everything standing above ground, scooping it up, letting it drop between the pincers back to the earth to lie forgotten. In the distance toward the river a tall needle-thin steeple

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<sup>53</sup> Ginsberg "Howl," *Selected Poems* 54.

silhouetted against the color-wracked sky of sunset. the sun a disk of angry red. Destruction and decay. (*Evening Sun*, 61)

The exact date of this piece is unknown, however the majority of the body of work which forms *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* was penned in the early to mid sixties. This would coincide with major renovations taking place in Chelsea, most significantly, the demolition of Old Penn Station which began in October 1963 and lasted for three years. Old Penn Station stood between 31<sup>st</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Streets and 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues, covering an area of nine acres, the site upon which Madison Square Garden stands today. The demolition of Old Penn Station formed part of a wider scheme to revitalize the Chelsea district by replacing dilapidated housing. Huncke details the clearances made prior to the construction of the high rise residential Penn Station South Houses in 1963, the steeple is presumably that of the nineteenth century Church of the Holy Apostles at 300 Ninth Avenue.

The demolition creates an environment which is alien to Huncke. For once there is “a feeling of space,” the city is “wide open”. This is understandable, as the ten 22 floor buildings housing 2,820 apartments designed by Herman Jessor<sup>54</sup> required an area stretching between Eighth and Ninth Avenue and from West 23<sup>rd</sup> St. to West 29<sup>th</sup>. Huncke’s view would have been partially obscured by London Terrace to the south west, a pre-war apartment building which remains standing today. However, in terms of space, stumbling across this open area within the condensed high-rise metropolis would be comparable to visiting Ground Zero today. An expanse of sky which could not be seen among the city’s narrow, corridor streets is suddenly visible to him. Nevertheless, this is by no means a moment of beatitude for the author, rather, a sense

<sup>54</sup> “Penn Station South Houses,” *Emporis Buildings*, 20 Nov. 2005  
<http://www.emporis.com/en/wm/cx/?id=102235>.



of intense exposure. The “iron claw” which descends from above is representative of the inexorable power of the dominant classes. The claw itself becomes the detached appendage of an invisible predator. It grasps at the rubble, “picking”, “squeezing”, and finally, “letting it drop between the pincers back to the earth to lie forgotten” as a predatory animal would a carcass. Huncke demonstrates the manner in which the city is being fed upon, a phenomenon which will be addressed in greater detail in the following chapter. However, in terms of New York’s shadow population, the momentary opening up of the city has further implications.

Huncke describes the near apocalyptic “color-wracked sky of sunset, the sun a disk of angry red.” This is a far from harmonious passage from day into night. Huncke’s earlier description of nightfall denotes a power shift from those who work in the city by day to New York’s shadow population. In this instance the transition is not so smooth. The idea of darkness and light coming together results in a “color-wracked sky,” thus mirroring the urban destruction resultant from the penetration of New York’s dominant classes into the city’s minatorial spaces. The sun remains resilient, raging against nightfall. The “color-wracked sky” also indicates a form of racial struggle. At the beginning of the chapter Sante comments upon how the shadow population could be seen as a different race or even species. However, the demolition site which Huncke surveys was interestingly also the location for the 1901 race riots. This considered, there is a further sense of the cyclical oppression and eviction of New York’s various excluded others present in the cityplace.

Both the image of the “iron claw” and that of the “raging sun” are suggestive of the direct threat which the dominant classes pose to the shadow population and Huncke’s way of life. The erection of the housing development itself poses a direct

threat to outlaw culture. A study of open space in New York housing states that Penn Station South Houses provides “several open spaces for use by its residents and the public. Numerous sitting areas and landscaped paths are provided, along with play equipment for children.”<sup>55</sup> This openness stands in direct opposition to the dark, claustrophobic nineteenth century New York which Penn Station South Houses replaced. For instance, the narrow nineteenth century residential alley, Franklin Terrace, which ran south from West 26<sup>th</sup> St.<sup>56</sup> was demolished to make way for the housing development.

To refer back to the beginning of the chapter, it is the streets and avenues of New York, most significantly Broadway, which recall and record the history and successes of the city’s daytime population. Conversely, the alleys and back streets of the old city such as Franklin Terrace formed the locale of the shadow population. With the introduction of open space, the shadows recede and in turn, the shadow population itself also recedes. In new developments urban planning addresses the potential prospect of criminal activity. Entranceways and passageways are well lit, and visibility is key, dark recesses are avoided.

Huncke then turns his attention to the portion of the old neighbourhood which remains:

The houses facing the scene set back from the street – yards rampant with tall weeds, grass –green stuff crawling up the sides with tiny purple and red flowers. Windows broken, rotting wooden banisters and steps with people sitting listless and tired. Half-naked children playing

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<sup>55</sup> “Open Space,” *Farley Post Office Moynihan Station Redevelopment Project*, 2 Dec. 2006, 6.5  
[www.nylovesbiz.com/pdf/moynihan.06OpenSpace.pdf](http://www.nylovesbiz.com/pdf/moynihan.06OpenSpace.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> Gilbert Tauber, “F” Streets of New York,” *NYC Streets*, 10 Dec 2006  
<http://www.oldstreets.com/index.asp?letter=F>.

in the grass. A child on a tricycle, naked to the waist, a pair of dirty blue jeans exposing half his buttocks, a toy pistol holstered banging against his hip, scooted alongside me as I returned toward neon-flushed Eighth Avenue. A young hip-looking Puerto Rican standing alongside the lamppost called to the boy as we reached the corner: "hey-cowboy." The boy laughed racing off down the street shouting, "Bang-bang-bang." (*Evening Sun*, 61)

Huncke describes the poverty which exists on the boundaries of the demolition site. This particular area had begun to deteriorate following the decline of the fur trade and eventual relocation of the fur district. Furthermore, as Old Penn Station fell into decline as a result of the success of the automobile, other social factors led to key landmarks such as The Grand Opera House deteriorating as a second rate movie theatre when the theatre district moved north to Broadway. Huncke does not romanticize this area in the same manner in which Kerouac romanticizes the black ghetto, as discussed in chapter one. Walking in this area does not offer him the same "joy, kicks, [and] darkness."<sup>57</sup> However, there is a certain organic nature to the manner in which Huncke describes those residents remaining on Twenty-ninth Street, which is not unlike Kerouac's depiction of Fellahin man, or the man of the soil. The dirt and decay lends a fertility to the otherwise barren, sanitised city. The housing developments offer open green spaces, yet they are mannered and tempered. Areas in which the plants are allowed to grow wild, are indicative of further personal freedoms, as examined in the following chapter in relation to the Liz Christie Garden located on The Bowery between East Houston and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. There is a similar wildness about

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<sup>57</sup> Kerouac, *On The Road* 169.

the “naked children playing in the grass”. This description appears more in character with that of an anthropological tribal study than a sketch of an urban scene. The children have the freedom to roam and they create their own play area amongst the grass, in contrast to the designated area filled with play equipment to be installed at Penn Station South Houses. There is a perceived innocence, and a clear boundary is imposed between the street upon which they live and Eighth Avenue, which Huncke describes as already having taken on “evening activities” (*Evening Sun*, 61). When the child reaches the lamppost at the corner of the two streets he ceases to follow the author, “racing off back down the street”. Nevertheless, the fact that the child is carrying a pistol is on Huncke’s part a subtle nod to the classic American archetype of outsidership, freedom and transgression.

Undoubtedly, a large portion of the community which Huncke describes was evicted to make way for the housing development and, given the escalating real estate value of what would become Chelsea Heights,<sup>58</sup> the existing dilapidated housing on Twenty-ninth Street would also be under imminent threat. Families would be relocated to high-rise housing projects either elsewhere in Manhattan or in the outer boroughs. The child playing cowboys on the street is a symbol of his community’s hopeless resistance against the push of gentrification. The child tries to defend his territory against newcomers with his benign toy gun, yet as with the community itself he has no true means of repelling the inevitable influx of invaders and eventual eviction.

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<sup>58</sup> As detailed in the following chapter, the nightclub “Tunnel” which Patrick Bateman visits in *American Psycho* opened in this area in the mid 1980’s. The *ALA Guide to New York City* recalls the disco’s publicity: “Opulence inside a stone fortress. Golden Chambers and Heavy Machinery. Dungeons below Ivory Towers. White and Willensky 187.

Metaphorically, the child defends a way of life: high-rise living in the projects would put an end to stoop culture, an intimacy and ludic interaction with the street. In chapter two, O'Hara's "F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53" was discussed in relation to the manner in which the poet turns the city into a form of sexual playground. To recap, the city becomes a place where lovers can tease, hide and run away from one another. A similar sense of play and freedom within the city, albeit represented in a more infantile form, is also implicit here. In terms of the child, the opening up of the city on the horizontal axis scuppers his game of hide and seek, as there are fewer places to hide. With a move to the projects, his range is then significantly restricted as he is moved to designated fenced play areas where he can be monitored by parents or carers. For the child the opening up of the city results in a shutting down of freedom and opportunity. The cowboy is corralled.

The opening up of the city has a wider significance in terms of true outlaw culture. As discussed earlier, the eradication of alleyways and recesses make for more effective surveillance within the cityplace. Law enforcement, quite literally a game of hide and seek played out at street level, becomes simpler for the police officer and more problematic for the criminal. Few of Manhattan's eighteenth century alleys remain today, and those that do, such as Stone Street just off Wall Street, are restored as potential tourist attractions. To wander through New York City's eighteenth and nineteenth century alleyways, the contemporary flâneur must travel to the outer boroughs, such as Red Hook Lane in Brooklyn, which incidentally is also currently under threat. If alleyways are indeed the location of transgressive activity, their disappearance in Manhattan suggests that the shadow population must either relocate to the outer boroughs or find a way of moving their practices into other spaces.

potentially in the open. The push to the outer boroughs was never so apparent as during Giuliani's tenure as Mayor of New York, as examined at the end of this chapter. However, with regards to Manhattan itself, untamed spaces receded rapidly during Huncke's lifetime. As with the child being forced into a designated play area, hedonistic and illicit practices were also corralled into specific areas of the city, where they could be monitored. From the time Huncke wrote *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson*, Manhattan's numerous red light areas receded from The Meatpacking District, Chinatown, The Lower East Side and most famously Times Square. 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue, shrinking to an almost non-existent presence within the city today. The parks, for reasons discussed earlier, are perhaps the one location in which transgressive behaviour can occur relatively unmonitored.

#### **Nocturnal movement and the Uncanny**

On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1996 at the St. Marks Poetry Project, Huncke gave his final reading before his death in August that year. It was entitled "Juxtaposition", the first paragraphs of which described walking home to his basement apartment at East Seventh St. and Avenue D. Huncke's automatic prose begins:

Heading homeward – late at night. The light at the corner- dark and only very few lamps lit in the dwellings along the way – helping create shadows – somewhat sparsely spread here and there on down toward the end of the street to the end of the block. The wind a bit gusty – making a sense of movement just beyond range of vision. A cluster of about six or maybe seven – still occupied – shabby old buildings – on down the way with garbage cans set out in front – surrounded by hungry-food searching rats suddenly aware of my approaching sounds

which caused them to become alert and they began running to hide...It had been disturbing, leaving a somewhat scary and uneasy feeling hanging in the air, so to speak. (*H. Reader*, 350)

The scene which Huncke describes is far removed from the noise, colour and glare of Midtown Manhattan. His location on the east side of Alphabet City remained one of the last enclaves of Lower Manhattan to resist gentrification. Huncke, even in his old age appears to favour the shadows. As with Huncke's earlier description of Twenty-ninth Street and Eighth Avenue, written in the early 1960s, there is the immediate presence of decay on the street. Huncke focuses specifically upon the six or seven "shabby old buildings," the garbage cans and the rats surrounding them. In many respects, the beginning of this piece mirrors Ginsberg's "Mugging," which was also written about the Lower East Side. As with "Mugging," we sense a certain fragility and vulnerability as the aged author walks the streets. Huncke's youthful ebullience is replaced by a definite unease whilst walking in the nocturnal city. Huncke lacks the same sharpness which he held as a youth. "The wind a bit gusty – making a sense of movement just beyond range of vision," suggests that his sight is not what it was and that the movement a distance ahead of him is imperceptible. This sense of uncertainty heightens his vulnerability. Huncke draws upon gothic elements in his description of the street, specifically in his use of darkness and light, wind, stillness broken by the sound of his own footsteps and the presence of the rats. He admits that the experience "had been disturbing, leaving a somewhat scary and uneasy feeling hanging in the air," suggesting that his fear ranges beyond the rats, to the possibility of being attacked by more dangerous urban predators. Huncke's fears are not unfounded, given that less than two years before this piece was written his companion and lover Louis

Cartwright was stabbed to death by an unknown attacker only five blocks from the area he describes, on the corner of East Seventh St. and Second Avenue. With age, the street level hunter becomes the potential hunted. While remaining part of the shadow population, his fears of certain elements of New York street life grow. Huncke continues, bringing elements of the uncanny into his work:

I occupied the basement apartment...where a wrought-iron gate opened onto a pair of steps – flanked by two good – sized garbage cans – a rather ornate porcelain doll had at some time earlier been tossed haphazardly onto the top of one of the cans. As I reached the gate I began observing the doll in detail. She was – in all probability – two or two and a half feet in length – dressed in a dusty and full black skirt – a violent pink – coloured blouse...One of her eyes had been damaged and hung down on her red – painted cheek – and the other – of faded blue – although in place appeared a trifle misshapen and looked a bit sad...How and why she'd been placed – or tossed – there perplexed me, and although I let her stay there at the time – I said to myself sometime later I'd move her and throw her away from the front of the house. It was a feeling of disgust which permeated my feeling about her being there – causing me to feel uncomfortable – and filled me with a kind of revulsion (*H. Reader*, 351).

The presence of the doll on the street amplifies Huncke's unease. In certain respects it demonstrates the effect of the urban outdoors upon that which is fragile. In "Mugging," Ginsberg comments how even resilient objects left upon the street become 'ravaged'. Similarly, the doll has a misshapen faded eye and another which is



damaged and hangs down her cheek. Huncke describes later how her hair is missing and the manner in which she has been “tossed haphazardly” away. Exposure to human and natural forces within the cityplace have deformed her. This is all the more disturbing, considering her height, which is comparable to that of a small child. Her pink blouse is not only violent on the eye, it is also indicative of the potential violence surrounding her.

For an individual such as Huncke, who has made a home of the street for a good portion of his life, it is fascinating that a doll causes such discomfort. An item which would usually be found in a home, specifically in a child’s bedroom, the doll is a foreign body on the street. If we return to Freud’s use of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, given Huncke’s years of vagrancy and his home being the street, these terms are inverted. It is an intrusion of the *heimlich* (or for Huncke, the *unheimlich*) onto the street which distorts a familiar environment into one which is unfamiliar and potentially threatening.

The doll’s fragile infantile form mirrors Huncke’s own vulnerability on the street in old age, her deformities a reminder as to how the city has ravaged his own body. However, over a period of months Huncke discovers a number of dolls, including an “old time rag-doll hanging from her neck from a cross piece of the gate” (*H. Reader*, 352). The author becomes disturbed as he tries to fathom who is leaving the dolls and why they are being left. The chain of causation begins with an invisible source. As with the naïve tourist upon which Huncke preyed as a Times Square hustler, now he too is unable to read these seemingly bizarre actions within the cityplace and unable to spot an advancing threat. He is exposed to the menace of the urban unknown and unseen.

**“Standing on a Street Corner Waiting for No one is Power [?]”<sup>59</sup>**

Movement in the ‘shadow city’ is vastly different to movement during the day: merely walking in the early hours of the morning arouses suspicion. Yet for Wojnarowicz as a young rent boy in Times Square, standing still is what attracts police attention. At the opening of the autobiographical graphic novel *Seven Miles a Second*, a twelve year old Wojnarowicz reveals: “The worst thing about the wait between customers was having to move every five minutes so that vice wouldn’t get wise; and my little legs hurt.”<sup>60</sup> To stand still when everyone else is walking is peculiar. To walk where no one else is walking is yet more peculiar. Such transgressions of social norms are, however, necessary for the manner in which Huncke and Wojnarowicz make money. Wojnarowicz must stand still for at least short periods of time if he wishes to attract a trick from the crowd, in the same sense that Huncke must prowl the *empty* streets in search of an opportunity to thief. Again we return to the concept of ‘passing’. In his introduction to *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson*, Allen Ginsberg refers to Huncke as an “Alien”. Ginsberg’s use of a capital ‘A’ highlights Huncke’s otherness, almost indicating that he is a member of another species, alien to humanity. As with Vivaldo and Kerouac or even Rufus, Irene and Claire, he is an individual who has entered into a society which does not necessarily embrace him. Issues of race are less amplified here than with the aforementioned protagonists, however, both Huncke and Wojnarowicz must also conceal certain details regarding their persona in order to avoid unwanted attention on the street. They must appear to the police and the majority of others around them as decent, sane,

<sup>59</sup> Gregory Corso, “Power,” *Happy Birthday of Death* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1960) 12.

<sup>60</sup> David Wojnarowicz, *Seven Miles a Second* (New York: DC Comics, 1996) 4.

sober, model citizens, yet simultaneously they must attract their 'amoral' counterparts: tricks, users and so on. As Huncke attempts to put on the mask of a normal citizen when confronted by the patrol car, Wojnarowicz must also try to appear to 'vice' as a normal twelve year old boy, wandering through Times Square.

As soon as Wojnarowicz stands still outside a 'sports' store, he is immediately approached by a trick. Although he has never seen the man before in his life they immediately recognise one another's intentions. They do not look directly at each other; the young Wojnarowicz stares into the shop window, whilst the balding middle-aged trick turns his back to him and asks surreptitiously, "how much?" (*Seven Miles a Second*, 5). Wojnarowicz sets his initial price high at twenty-five dollars, knowing that he would settle for three. They finally agree at ten dollars, and set off through Times Square stopping first at a coffee bar before finding a cheap motel. The stop off at the coffee bar, Wojnarowicz informs us, is customary as it allows both the hustler and his trick to check that the police are not following them. Whilst walking the trick recalls his past memories of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street stating: "y'know 42nd street really changed," (*Seven Miles a Second*, 6) to which Wojnarowicz coughs sarcastically. We realise that for the trick, the bars and clubs of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street may have changed, yet from a homeless perspective the same activities and movements are re-enacted in the same manner in which they did in Huncke's era. At the café, Wojnarowicz offers the aside "people with no place to go would buy a thirty cent cup of coffee and sit...day and night," (*Seven Miles a Second*, 5) an immediate link between the 'night people' of two separate eras. Although there are a good forty years between Huncke's and Wojnarowicz's arrival in Times Square, the meaning of their movements remains somewhat unchanged. In a rather primitive manner, walking is equated with

scavenging, whereas sitting (in cafeterias and so on) is associated with rest, shelter and the development of street knowledge (through watching / listening).

### **Loss of Gravity**

For Wojnarowicz, walking also has a far more profound meaning. In his introduction to *Seven Miles a Second* he writes:

The minimum speed required to break through the earth's gravitational pull is seven miles a second. Since economic conditions prevent us from gaining access to rockets or spaceships we would have to learn to run awfully fast to achieve escape from where we are heading. (*Seven Miles a Second*, 3)

The cover of *Seven Miles a Second* illustrates this concept, a scene which depicts a twelve year old Wojnarowicz running through the streets of New York City. Clad in jeans and a white T-Shirt the emaciated young boy runs down the central reservation of an unidentifiable street toward the reader. Headlights glare menacingly behind him, and he is surrounded on all sides by dark, menacing skyscrapers. His fear stricken expression suggests that he is attempting to outrun the city, to "achieve escape" from where he is heading, yet his front foot is literally rooted to the ground. The leg upon which he is applying pressure is depicted as being the bark of a young tree, the roots of which bury down through the asphalt and intertwine with the ravel of pipes and wires beneath the city. The implication here is that no matter how fast Wojnarowicz and his contemporaries run they cannot attain sufficient speed to uproot themselves from their dire situations.

In section three of the novel Peter Hujar, one of Wojnarowicz's friends who is suffering from AIDS, wakes up feeling sick and claustrophobic. He later recounts to

Wojnarowicz how he burst into the city streets and “ran and ran and ran.”

Wojnarowicz confides, “I’m thinking maybe he got up to a speed of no more than ten miles an hour” (*Seven Miles a Second*, 41). Wojnarowicz already knows that ten miles an hour is insufficient speed to “break through the earth’s gravitational pull,” yet he understands why his friend is running. He attempts a similar practice in his car: “when I’m pressing my foot to the accelerator...there is a sense of being just on the edge of going airborne...I feel for a second I could outrace my own being I can outrun my existence the terrible weight and responsibility of my own body but its not true” (*Seven miles a Second*, 50). Wojnarowicz underlines his awareness that no one can realistically ‘outrun’ their existence in this manner. Nevertheless, he suggests that the greater the speed achieved by the individual, the closer his or her proximity to a *sense* of escape or liberation. He goes on to state: “I wish I could reach speeds such as this with my own body, maybe slam into the sky, smack into the horizon and either disappear or fossilize into stone or leave behind a cartoon black silhouette of having broken through like it was a wall” (*Seven Miles a Second*, 50). Here movement is a push towards transcendence. As Solnit states, Wojnarowicz’s New York is “not hell but limbo, the place in which restless souls swirl forever.”<sup>61</sup> He longs to change his surroundings, to blast out of this ‘limbo’ in which he is encumbered by an ailing body, into an abstract supernal world where he is free. Movement is therefore an expression of intolerance for Wojnarowicz. To stand still is to accept his predicament, to succumb to the fact that he is ‘rooted’ to the city streets. Yet to walk, run and to drive

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<sup>61</sup> Solnit 194.

at speed is to protest, to search for change even if change appears to be ultimately unattainable.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Directionless Wanderer**

We often discover Wojnarowicz walking for what appears to be no specific reason:

Some nights we'd walk seven or eight hundred blocks practically the whole island of Manhattan crisscrossing east and west north and south each on opposite sides of the streets picking up every wine bottle we found and throwing it ten feet in the air so it crash exploded a couple of inches away from the other's feet.... (*Knives*, 5)

Wojnarowicz's nocturnal walks have no apparent destination, no clear motive; he walks for the sake of walking. Unfazed by the city's minatorial geography, its boundaries and borders, Wojnarowicz criss-crosses the length and breadth of Manhattan. As he later reveals, "When I was in the street walking, it didn't feel like walking; it was simply the body being propelled by blind legs" (*Knives*, 227). In many respects Wojnarowicz's almost automatic movement, or desire for movement, is comparable to that of the Beats. In his teenage years Wojnarowicz had been inspired by the Beat Generation, especially Kerouac and Burroughs. As Dan Cameron, the senior curator of New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art states, "Just as the Beats found America in the 1950s to be a dehumanized prison of exclusionary mainstream values, Wojnarowicz found America in the 1980s to be in a similar ethical

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<sup>62</sup> A handwritten list by Wojnarowicz reads "Getting off the street <why>". Wojnarowicz goes on to high light "lack of power on the streets," "self destruction vs. self control," and the "explanation of science lesson (loss of gravity)." David Wojnarowicz, "Getting off the Street," Series III, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 27, ms., The David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library, New York.

state of emergency."<sup>63</sup> Certainly, the idea of Manhattan being a 'dehumanised prison' correlates with the destitute Wojnarowicz's rhythmical pacing up and down the island. Like the Beats before him, his movement within the city is a desperate clutch at freedom. Burroughs himself praised Wojnarowicz for having "caught the age old voice of the road, the voice of the traveller, the outcast, the thief, the whore, the same voice that was heard in Villon's Paris and the Rome of Petronius."<sup>64</sup> In his later art work, Cameron points out, "he uses cut-up maps and money repeatedly to suggest the artificiality of geographical, social and political boundaries."<sup>65</sup> His walking habits can be seen as an early expression of this. By walking where he wants, when he wants, Wojnarowicz breaks through the invisible restrictions which hem the pedestrian into specific areas within the cityplace.

Yet we must also remember, as Solnit states, that other than being a mere form of demonstration, "walking remained a recourse for those with nowhere to sleep."<sup>66</sup> Like Huncke, Wojnarowicz is a night walker due to the fact that he has no home to return to. On certain occasions walking is a practical alternative to sleep, as it is a method of keeping warm. On other occasions, sleeping on the noisy, dirty streets of the metropolis is simply impossible. In a section of *Seven Miles a Second* entitled "Stray Dogs" we are shown a tableau of Wojnarowicz and an unnamed friend attempting to sleep on the litter strewn stoop of an derelict building. The caption reads "I woke up thirsty with a mouth full of soot and car exhaust" (*Seven Miles a Second*, 19). Sleep for Wojnarowicz appears to be a far from pleasurable experience, which he

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<sup>63</sup> Dan Cameron and Dennis Szacaks, "QAR David Wojnarowicz," *Queer Arts*, 21. Dec 2004 <<http://www.queerarts.org/archive/9902/wojnarowicz/wojnarowicz.htm>>

<sup>64</sup> William Burroughs, blurb, *Close to the Knives*, by David Wojnarowicz (New York: Vintage, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Cameron and Szacaks.

<sup>66</sup> Solnit 192.

would rather, more often than not, substitute for walking. Yet this in itself has its drawbacks:

As with certain drugs, the lack of consistent sleep...acts in a way where time becomes meaningless. Night and day become confused. An event that happened minutes ago feels like it may have happened weeks or months ago. Everything...just slides into a blur of desperate need. I either did what I remember doing or I dreamt it and neither really matters. (*Seven Miles a Second*, 19)

These characteristics, in turn, slip into Wojnarowicz's writing. As Solnit states, "He writes in a collage of memories, encounters, dreams, fantasies and outbursts studded with startling metaphors and painful images."<sup>67</sup> As Wojnarowicz leads us through New York's shadow city we feel what can only be described as a somnambulist drift. We move almost automatically through the city streets in what feels like a semi-conscious state. Out of this half sleep appears a series of images; some real, some formed in dreams or nightmares. Often due to the bizarre nature of New York's street life we find it difficult to distinguish which of the images are founded upon reality. Two extracts from *Close to the Knives* exemplify this sensation, the first of which takes us through 42<sup>nd</sup> Street:

Saturday night on 42<sup>nd</sup> street is a fishtank sensation of glittering streets swimming with what feels like too many people, but somehow it all fits together strangely: angry drug dealers appearing out of the soup with magnified hands blurring in front of my face and I can see each drop of sweat on this guy's forehead even in the movie trail of faces

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<sup>67</sup> Solnit 192.



belonging to the frozen ticket sellers in the dirty glass booths of moviehouse lobbies...I see my feet and they're rising and falling on the dark sidewalks and then the jiggling motion of orange crush sloshing around in the plastic tanks on the counter of some hotdog joint and the wipe of a napkin over a tourist's face, looking kind of panicked at the rollercoaster of flesh sliding by and around him...there's a gray-faced pederast lurking in an entranceway to the sporting goods shop, trying to look nonchalant next to a deep-sea skin diver with a fucked-up manikin face. (*Knives*, 180-1)

Here Wojnarowicz focuses upon movement and sensation. The hallucinatory sense of his own automatic movement is present as his feet appear to be 'rising' and 'falling' on the dark sidewalk without his consent. Wojnarowicz's description of the street having a "fishtank sensation" makes us feel that he is looking in onto the street rather than actually being part of the crowd. He uses the metaphor initially to describe how overcrowded the street is, hinting at the way in which bodies slide past one another. Yet as Wojnarowicz begins to move, we feel that he is somewhat detached from the crowd, that he is viewing it as though it were behind a glass wall or upon a television screen. Indeed, Wojnarowicz appears fascinated by the idea of plastic/glass partitions. Alongside the street being a 'fishtank', he also focuses upon the movie ticket sellers in dirty glass booths and the plastic tanks on the counter of the hotdog joint. This in turn establishes a sense of voyeurism, dividing the public into those looking in and those looking out. Even the orange-crush is watched as is 'jiggles' provocatively in its tank like an erotic dancer behind a plastic peepshow screen.

Wojnarowicz's view of the street is somewhat similar to O'Hara's 'camera eye'. However, Wojnarowicz's 'movie trail' is more unsteady/paranoiac, as it attempts to focus on those coming at him out of the 'soup'. In many respects his paranoia is justified. This is not, after all, a casual lunch break stroll. The tension of the strip is epitomised by the beads of sweat which Wojnarowicz notices standing on the head of one man, and the panicked expression of another 'tourist' as he watches the "rollercoaster of flesh sliding by and around him". Obvious threats loom on the strip: angry drug dealers appear out of the crowd, and the pederast who picked up Wojnarowicz when he was younger continues to lurk in the entranceway to the sports store. Wojnarowicz focuses on each of these elements for only a second. In this short passage we are offered a rapid succession of tableaux: a panoramic view of the glittering streets, a close up of angry drug dealers, an extreme close up of his own hands, a close up of beads of sweat on a man's forehead and so on. This in turn adds to the feeling of paranoia in so much as it gives the impression that Wojnarowicz is wary of letting his eyes fall upon one object for too long. He is constantly scanning the crowd. In turn, Wojnarowicz's walk takes on a nightmarish quality. There is no rational link between the phantasmagorical series of images and they appear in an aggressive and random manner as if in a dream.

The second extract from *Close to the Knives* details a drugs pick up. Once again Wojnarowicz's places a heavy emphasis upon the surreal, nightmarish qualities of walking in the 'shadow city':

In the midnight hours it's all drug dealers and guns in people's faces and heads being blown to bits and a sudden hand comes up out of the darkness and street movement and a gun is in your chest and, blam,

down on your back, blood shooting out like old faithful geysers and multiple slapping of feet heading away fast in all directions and cinderblocked doorways to abandoned buildings are opened up and a small hole where, walking by night, you see somebody's legs for a second, hanging out the hole, then sliding inside and they're gone or someone huddling next to a wall and a cinderblock disappears by their shoulder and a hand reaches out like Thing on the Addams Family and takes your cash and hands back a small envelope of cut dope. (*Knives*, 179)

The first section of this extract is pure speculation as to what could happen to the midnight walker. The streets, which are "all drug dealers" after midnight, become the backdrop to a scene reminiscent of a horror movie. Wojnarowicz places us in the position of a pedestrian walking in a derelict area of the city. There is no hint of streetlight as, without warning, a hand reaches out of the darkness followed by a gunshot. We are left with blood "shooting out like old faithful geysers" from our chests as our assailants disappear once again into the night. Again Wojnarowicz creates an immediate sense of paranoia. Clearly, when attempting to score drugs from a pusher, being shot and robbed is one of the many thoughts which cross his mind.

### **Marginalized Manhattan, Urban Decay and Skid Row**

In chapter four of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz examines the manner in which the gay men are marginalized in American society. The chapter entitled "Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration" is divided into twelve sections. Section three begins with Wojnarowicz taking to the streets after learning that a friend has died of AIDS. Once again walking is depicted as a cathartic act, an attempt to

escape the pains of his current existence. Interestingly, he heads “through the gathering darkness and traffic” to “the dying section of town where bodies litter the curbsides and dogs tear apart the stinking garbage by the doorways” (*Knives*, 67).

Although the exact location remains undisclosed, the surroundings to which he returns are clearly reminiscent of those in which he grew up as a homeless adolescent.

Wojnarowicz notes that “there was a green swell to the clouds above the buildings like a green metal retrieved from the river years ago” (*Knives*, 67). The light shares similarities with the putrid green neon light which falls upon nocturnal Times Square, lending a ghoulish ambience to the streets below. However, in this instance Wojnarowicz does not locate the source of the light and we are led to believe that the “green swell to the clouds” is a direct result of the decay at street level. The pure white clouds have somehow become corroded by their proximity to urban putridity.

Wojnarowicz focuses upon the various cycles of decay recurrent on the streets: the “stinking garbage,” alleyways of “rotting dead fish and buzzing flies” (*Knives*, 67). Decay is also bodily, those anchored to the streets become part of the detritus:

...suddenly in the stench and piling of decaying fish I realised I was staring at a human hand, with the fat pale shape and colour of a cherub's hand. It stirred to life and where previously there had been discarded men's suits and playing cards, a fat white man naked down to his waist suddenly materialized and sat up angrily. He had an enormous pale belly on which was incised a terrible wound from which small white worms tumbled as he gesticulated like a marionette...(*Knives*, 68)

The horrific nature of New York's shadow world is amplified. At first we encounter a seemingly motionless disembodied hand left amongst the trash. The 'disembodied' hand then unexpectedly moves, comparable to the drug dealer's hand which Wojnarowicz describes appearing through a hole in a cinderblock wall: "like Thing on the Addams Family...takes your cash and hands back a small envelope of cut dope" (*Knives*, 179). There is some relief in the discovery that this particular hand is also attached to a person who simply happens to be sleeping rough under the refuse sacks. The horror is then perpetuated by the grotesque description of the man's stomach which bears a maggot filled wound. Wojnarowicz suggests that the vagrant's body is becoming part of the refuse. At first there is no way of distinguishing living human tissue from the rotting material surrounding him. Even when he becomes animated, it is clear that his body is being eaten alive by parasites in exactly the same manner in which the dead fish in the alley are devoured. He has literally become part of the detritus of society.

Further evidence of bodily decay is present in Wojnarowicz's description of a prostitute walking in the area:

She had some kind of disease on her legs: large bloodless wounds which she attempted to disguise with makeup. Whenever she heard the sound of a car slowing down near the curb, thinking it was a customer, she would painfully lift her body up to reveal a delirious smile and dead eyes and a weak flailing of her arms as the sign of a greeting.  
(*Knives*, 68)

Unlike the man sleeping beneath the refuse sacks, the prostitute attempts to conceal her ailments. The application of makeup is an attempt to project a healthy demeanour.

thus making her desirable to curb crawlers. Her actions are reminiscent of Huncke attempting to play the role of a normal citizen when confronted by the patrol car yet, due to drug use, psychological and physical trauma, both her smile and arm movements are heavily over exaggerated. Attempting to appear normal whilst doing “the junkie walk” (*Knives*, 68) lends a further ghoulis quality to her street persona. There is little life left in her. Her movements are painful, her eyes are described as “dead” and her wounds are large yet “bloodless”. In essence, she is a personification of the neighbourhood in which she resides, through which the lifeblood of the city has slowly ceased to pump leading to a steady deterioration.

There are further parallels with Kerouac’s “Negro whores...limping in a Benzedrine psychosis,”<sup>68</sup> as detailed in chapter two. However, in this instance the debilitated outcasts are clearly depicted as forgotten by-products of a capitalist society rather than eroticised. Wojnarowicz’s gaze falls specifically on “discarded men’s suits” (*Knives*, 68) amongst the garbage. The conventional business uniform has been worn to the point of becoming useless and then thrown away. Wojnarowicz suggests that those inhabiting this part of town, most explicitly the prostitute, have similarly been used by society and then discarded. Those who paid for her services when she was desirable, prove a catalyst to her demise. Left disease ridden by her clients, they now pass her by. She stands in a “grey haze of traffic and exhaust,” (*Knives*, 68) continuing to be poisoned by those wealthier than herself. The following chapter will examine in greater detail the manner in which the dominant classes feed upon society’s excluded others.

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<sup>68</sup> Kerouac, “New York Scenes,” 100.

Wojnarowicz notices the “fluttering newspapers of the past with photographs of presidents and their waving wives haloed in the camera flashes” (*Knives*, 68).

These newspapers, which litter the alleys, highlight the stark contrast between daytime New York and its nocturnal ‘shadow’ population. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the history of daytime New York chronicles the lives of “famous people” or “great events,” yet the history of the nocturnal city is undoubtedly written and controlled by the people of the night, the excluded others. Wojnarowicz’s description forges parallels between photographs of the famous and religious iconography. Those who have power or public recognition are haloed in the pure white light of the camera flash. Conversely, New York’s excluded others are bathed in the putrid green light of decay, only glimpsing the world of the privileged on the yellowing pages of abandoned newspapers.

### **AIDS and Urban ‘Disintegration’**

Wojnarowicz draws distinct parallels between those left to die on the streets and his contemporaries dying of AIDS in hospital. The same images of death and decay are present:

I went up to see him in the hospital, its all septic green, or pale brown and yellow, hazes of light filtering in the windows...his eyes are bare slits with pearly surfaces glimmering inside them like somehow they’ve stopped reflecting light...his nose...it’s covered in the white and grey color of cancer...(*Knives*, 69-70)

Wojnarowicz’s use of “septic green” draws us immediately back to his description of the streets. The hospital environment carries the same green tinges of decay. His use of “septic” reminds us of the vagrant’s infested wound, whilst the lesions which cover

the AIDS sufferer's body are reminiscent of those which mark the legs of the prostitute. Both on the streets and in the hospital there is the same sense of helplessness and stasis; that bodies are being left to rot. Wojnarowicz describes the virus in its early stages of discovery:

So I'm watching this thing move around in my environment, among friends and strangers: something invisible and abstract and scary: some connect the dots version of hell only its not as simple as hell. It's got no shape yet or else I'm blind to it or we're just blind to it or else it is just invisible until the dots are connected. Draw a line from here to there to there to here with all of the dots being people you see from miles up in the air or from the ledge of a tall building or the window of a small plane but it's still not that easy because you can't shut out the smell of rotting. You can't shut out the sound of it: the sound of the man standing on the sidewalk trying to scream that he's going to throw himself in front of the passing automobiles because he wants to stop that slowly drawn line approaching him from the distance with all the undeniability of a slow train carrying sixteen tons of pressure...(*Knives*, 66)

Wojnarowicz's abstract description draws AIDS from the private into the public sphere, and in doing so attacks existing preconceptions of the disease. Early newspapers and medical journals referred to the disease now known as AIDS as GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) or "community-acquired immune dysfunction."<sup>69</sup> Wojnarowicz emphasises that AIDS is not only confined to the city's illicit spaces: the

<sup>69</sup> L.K. Altman, "New homosexual disorder worries officials," *The New York Times*, 11 May 1982, qtd. in *The History of AIDS*, 13 Nov 2006 <[http://www.avert.org/his81\\_86.htm](http://www.avert.org/his81_86.htm)>.



gay demimonde, bars, cruising areas, red light districts and porno shows. Everyone is at risk, regardless of sexuality, profession or social preferences. It is New York City's one true spectre: an invisible killer developing a network of death throughout the cityplace. Wojnarowicz views this network from above, reminiscent of Quinn's mapping of Stillman's movements in Auster's *City of Glass*. As with *City of Glass*, there is a sense that in order to understand specific movements within the cityplace it is necessary to view these movements from outside the city, looking down onto the streets. Each sexual interaction which results in infection results in a metaphorical line being drawn between the two individuals. As the disease is passed further the author visualises the chains which develop, spreading throughout the city streets and beyond. This birds-eye view of the city demonstrates the scope of the disease. Wojnarowicz then zooms in to street level to focus upon the individual. Those who are uninfected live in terror of the "slowly drawn line approaching." The disease is given a physicality, stalking its victims and at every moment drawing closer. The victim does not know the source of the threat, as it is unidentifiable and unreadable. This in turn leads to an intense paranoia: "he's going to throw himself in front of the passing automobiles because he wants to stop that slowly drawn line approaching him." Suicide appears a viable method of escape from being stalked by the disease.

Wojnarowicz uses movement, or specifically a lack of movement, to emphasise helplessness. As with the comic book depiction of Wojnarowicz himself on the cover of *Seven Miles a Second*, the individual described in the above passage is similarly rooted to the pavement in the face of the slowly approaching disease. AIDS is described as a "slow train carrying sixteen tons of pressure." yet the pedestrian does not have the ability to muster sufficient speed to dodge the oncoming train. The

collision is inevitable. The automobile owner is depicted as inhabiting a different dimension to that of the pedestrian. In the same manner in which the pedestrian is fixed, the stream of passing drivers are detached from the abstract street action which Wojnarowicz describes, via momentum. The writer by no means suggests that the affluent have the ability to outrun, and are therefore exempt from the threat. They simply view the phenomenon from a removed perspective and have the ability to withdraw. The pedestrian experiences both bodily and non-bodily street level decay at close quarters, for the driver the smell of rotting is filtered out, the images of decay blurred or even overlooked.

Following his friend's death from AIDS, Wojnarowicz returns to the "dying section of town" (*Knives*, 67) in the early sections of "Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration," functions on a number of levels. It is primarily a study of outsidership, the manner in which those who are no longer accepted as part of society are excluded, and driven into the city's less desirable enclaves. As a homosexual man, Wojnarowicz clearly associates with this form of exclusion. The author's use of the word 'disintegration' in the title of this chapter has significant bearing. The use of the prefix 'dis-' expresses the negation or reversal of social integration. Disintegration refers here to the willed restriction and ultimate exclusion of specific groups, including homosexuals, from society. Similarly, disintegration also denotes the psychological and physical state experienced by these groups once excluded. Kerouac's description, "...across the street you can see the ruins of New York already started – the Globe Hotel being torn down there, an empty tooth whole on 44<sup>th</sup>

street,”<sup>70</sup> appears somewhat more apt when examined in this context. The individuals and the buildings themselves are literally left to disintegrate and expire.

It is understandable then that after learning of his friend's AIDS related death Wojnarowicz heads not to Midtown but to skid row. New York's historically affluent areas, Fifth Avenue, the Upper East Side and so forth never witness the same form of decay. Here there is a constant sense of either preservation or renewal. The author's wanderings in the “dying section of town” (*Knives*, 67) parallel the various forms of ‘disintegration’ experienced in his own life.

Unlike Kerouac, Wojnarowicz has a number of allegiances with those on skid row. As with Huncke, he experienced life on the streets from an early age. However, at this point in his career he has achieved relative success as an artist and is not living on the streets. He no longer shares the same economic needs as those “bodies” which he describes surrounding him. Yet, as a member of the gay community at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, he experiences a very similar form of social distancing. In 1983, New York City's Commissioner of Health, David Spencer, stated that: “landlords have evicted individuals with AIDS” and that “the Social Security Administration is interviewing patients by phone rather than face to face.”<sup>71</sup> The Commissioner's statements have a significant bearing on street level New York. Firstly, regardless of class or financial status, those suspected of carrying AIDS are unwelcome tenants, expected to leave their homes, move to the margins of society and are automatically grouped among New York's excluded others. In terms of contact,

<sup>70</sup> Kerouac, “New York Scenes,” 100.

<sup>71</sup> R. Enlow, “Special session,” *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, eds. I.J. Selikoff, A.S. Teirstein, and S.Z. Hirschman, Vol. 437, (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1984) 291, qtd. in *The History of AIDS*, 13 Nov 2006 <[http://www.avert.org/his81\\_86.htm](http://www.avert.org/his81_86.htm)>.

they are held at a protective distance. The Social Security Administration's decision to interview AIDS sufferers only by phone reflects a wider public concern with regards to contact. At street level, a passing businessman may consider momentarily traversing the divide between himself and the city's population by *handing* a panhandler his spare change, rather than placing it in his paper cup. However, at the height of paranoia in the mid-eighties, even the most fleeting physical contact with a potential AIDS sufferer would almost certainly be avoided. This is of course related to a global ignorance as to the modes by which the disease could be transmitted. In the chapter entitled "Living Close to the Knives," which follows "Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration," Wojnarowicz states: "with the appearance of AIDS and the subsequent death of friends and neighbors, I have the recurring sensation of seeing streets and radius of blocks from miles above, only now instead of focusing on just the form of myself in the midst of this Other World I see everything and everyone at once" (*Knives*, 88).

Wojnarowicz returns to his birds-eye view of the city, elaborating that the distancing is a result of the AIDS virus. His reference to the "Other World" is perhaps most fascinating. For the author, the "Other World" is the world from which he is excluded, what Sante describes as daytime New York. He realises that he is part of an outlaw culture, admitting: "since my existence is essentially outlawed before I come into knowledge of what my desires or what my sensibility is, then I can only step back from the arms of the government and organized religion..." (*Knives*, 59) The step back which Wojnarowicz takes allows him to critique 'the other world'. Firstly, he recognises that the 'Other World' is founded upon restrictions:

The world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of being born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. (*Knives*, 87)

Wojnarowicz's wider political critique is entrenched firmly in the cityplace. The stoplight and the no smoking sign, each restricting individual action within the public sphere, speak for a myriad of further social constraints set in place by government measures. The red light indicates when a boundary cannot be crossed, limiting movement. The following chapter develops these ideas regarding restricted movement within the city, addressing the modes in which the dominant classes pose a threat to urban wandering. Wojnarowicz's reference to the 'rental world' hints at a lack of permanency within the city. Those inhabiting rented space are highly vulnerable to change. In terms of personal circumstances, bankruptcy may lead to eviction. As with the AIDS sufferers who were asked to leave their apartments, other eventualities may also result in tenants being evicted. For example, the following chapter also examines the effect of gentrification on Lower East Side communities. As areas become desirable, the rent is raised and those who cannot afford to pay are moved on.

Wojnarowicz's reference to the split rail fence allows for a momentary shift from urban to rural imagery. It recalls the pioneering age and Manifest Destiny. The fence represented the westward spread of democracy across the United States: the divide between that which was civilised and the wilderness. Wojnarowicz questions this once positive symbol of progress. The fence is restrictive. Beyond it the individual can see "miles of barren wilderness," the potential to freely wander; yet he

or she is hemmed in. This of course applies to the cityplace, where a wealth of opportunity is visible, yet invisible social and economic boundaries heavily limit the individual. New York's socially excluded 'others' have little choice as to where they are accepted, where they live, work or shop. They are corralled into specific areas and expected to stay there. Members of the wealthy dominant classes, such as Bateman, have almost unlimited access to "earth or space, choice or movement," while the rest remain fixed. Wojnarowicz continues:

The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies.

The packaged world; the world of metallic motion. The world where

I've always felt like an alien...One stops before a light that turns from

green to red and one grows centuries old in that moment. Someone

once said that the Other World was run by a different species of

humans. It is the distance of stepping back or slowing down that

reveals the Other World. (*Knives*, 88)

A sense of urban separateness remains central. The world of "coded sounds,"

"language," "lies...the packaged world" reminds us specifically of both the

newspapers which Wojnarowicz describes littering the alleyways and the neon

advertising hoardings which hang overhead. The newspapers perpetuate the world of

lies, haloing politicians in a pseudo divine light. Similarly, the hoardings are an

attempt to lure the consumer. The "packaged world" offers infinite opportunity, but

only to those who can afford it. The neon adverts illuminate the likes of Wojnarowicz

and Huncke in the streets below, yet they are clearly not aimed at them. Nor will they

be 'haloed' in the 'white light' reserved only for politicians and celebrities. They

witness this phenomenon in the same manner in which they witness "the world of

metallic motion” from the sidewalk: present yet removed. Wojnarowicz comments that he’s “always felt like an alien,” and that the ‘Other World’ is possibly run by a “different species of humans”. This feeling of physical otherness of course echoes Sante’s comments that New York’s shadow people lived “in a silence that broached the supernatural and might be seen as omens, as memento mori, as demons, as damned souls, as spectres and walking reproaches.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in the eyes of the police, Huncke is considered a creep, rather than a human being.

In terms of appearance, the dominant classes do appear different at street level. For instance, the car, particularly the limousine, can be seen as an extension to the body, the hard outer shell of power, affluence or celebrity.<sup>73</sup> The author comments: “Those who owned cars, when witnessed close up...had a vague transparency and thickness to their skin.” (*Knives*, 30) Wojnarowicz is alien in that he does not possess this body or skin, and has followed the trend of the sidewalk rather than that of the road. As a walker he follows a completely different set of signs. The “DON’T WALK” sign which halts his movement gives precedence to the automobile driver or passenger. The “WALK” sign is illuminated for an average of seven seconds, followed by a further seven seconds of a flashing “DON’T WALK”. Generally, traffic lights remain green for sixty, ninety or one hundred and twenty seconds. The flow of traffic through the city is far more important than that of pedestrian movement. Position on the street itself mirrors position within society. Those who can afford a car are protected and given the privilege of movement. Those without a car are exposed to the dangers of the city and limited in terms of position, range, accessibility and speed.

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<sup>72</sup> Sante 315.

<sup>73</sup> In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan echoes this idea: “The car has become the carapace, the protective and aggressive shell, of urban and suburban man.” Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 224-5

Wojnarowicz argues that the state of being halted, or at least forcibly slowed down reveals the Other World. Understanding is gleaned when one “stops before a light that turns from green to red and...grows centuries old in that moment.” In many respects this decrease in pace mirrors that of the nineteenth century flâneur ‘taking a turtle for a walk.’ Jenks argues that “the sedentary mannerism[s] of the flâneur are essentially critical rebuffs to the late-modern politics of speed.”<sup>74</sup> The early flâneur’s use of pace can be seen as a reaction against the increasingly frenetic nature of the nineteenth century urban environment: an act of willed transgression. The politics of speed in twentieth century New York function in a manner whereby the city accelerates for the dominant classes and decelerates for the shadow population, forming an every widening chasm between the two:

Driving around the city, it didn’t take long to realise that if you didn’t have a vehicle, a machine of speed, you owned poverty....(Owning a vehicle, you could drive by and with the pressure of your foot on the accelerator and your eyes on the road you could pass it quickly – maybe not fast enough to overlook it completely, but fast enough so that the speed of the auto and the fears of the brain created a fractured marriage of light and sound. The images of poverty would lift and float and recede quickly like the grey shades of memory so that these images were in the past before you came upon them. (*Knives*, 30-1)

Speed becomes a weapon, “the speed and the intent of the vehicle replaces the bows and arrows of history” (*Knives*, 31). Depressing the accelerator does not obliterate the images of poverty, yet as Wojnarowicz states, it causes them to recede

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<sup>74</sup> Jenks, “Watching your Step,” 149.



rapidly into the past. Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* exemplifies this phenomenon. Sherman and Maria find themselves lost in the Bronx in Sherman's \$48,000 Mercedes. They are confronted with fractured images of poverty and desolation: "Low apartment buildings with windows missing,"<sup>75</sup> "entire blocks of the city without a building left standing," "low light and silhouettes..." Confronted by the threat of the shadow population, "Sherman sped up and left the eerie outpost in the wasteland."<sup>76</sup> It is not until speed is no longer an option that the gap between the dominant classes and the shadow population narrows. This is an explicit fear for Sherman, "Suppose he had a flat tire? Or the engine flooded? They would be in a pretty fix. Just keep rolling. That's the main thing."<sup>77</sup> When momentum is lost the fears of the dominant classes advance. This is of course the case in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, and also Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, when billionaire Eric Packer's limousine is stalled in traffic and becomes involved in a violent anti-capitalist demonstration. The shell of the car provides protection, yet is somewhat ineffective in comparison to the weapon of speed: "Eric lowered himself into the body of the car and eased the sunroof shut."<sup>78</sup> Immobility results in direct confrontation. Unlike the nineteenth century flâneur, Wojnarowicz's protest is not against speed itself. Movement is equated with freedom. It is the manner in which the politics of speed are used as a further method of subjugating New York's shadow population which Wojnarowicz is intent upon exposing.

**"Someday a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets"**<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (London: Picador, 1990) 94.

<sup>76</sup> Wolfe 97.

<sup>77</sup> Wolfe 98.

<sup>78</sup> Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003) 88.

<sup>79</sup> *Taxi Driver*, dir. Martin Scorsese, perf. Robert De Niro, Columbia, 1976.

Each morning before sunrise, a crew of over fifty men and women wearing red boiler suits descend upon Times Square. They are employees of the Times Square Alliance (formerly the Times Square Business Improvement District<sup>80</sup>, or BID for short). The sanitation crew's duties include emptying litter baskets, removing graffiti and vacuuming, scrubbing, washing and disinfecting the sidewalks "with the help of the Alliance's high-tech cleaning machine, Felix."<sup>81</sup> In conjunction with the sanitation crew, the Times Square Alliance also employs Public Safety Officers who patrol Times Square on a twenty-four hour basis. The unarmed officers are linked by radio to the NYPD and are trained to report any suspicious activity within the area, ranging from the operation of petty criminals such as pickpockets and shoplifters to potential bomb threats. The Alliance reports that between 1993 and 2003, crime in Times Square has fallen by 69 percent.<sup>82</sup> Banners hang from lampposts celebrating "THE NEW TIMES SQUARE".

The mid nineties saw the Alliance as an integral part of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's broader 'Quality of Life' campaign. The intention of the campaign was to rescue a reportedly "decaying, cold and terrifying New York"<sup>83</sup> from chaos. The "clean up" campaign involved what Giuliani referred to as a "street sweep" which targeted, amongst others, "predatory criminals," gangs, loiterers (including prostitutes) and the homeless. The actions taken against these individuals and groups varied, however, Giuliani's overall aim remained clear: to diminish the street level threat experienced

<sup>80</sup> Times Square Business Improvement District was formed in 1992. Property owners in the area were taxed approximately 0.3% of the estimated value of their properties to fund the clean up project.

<sup>81</sup> "Times Square Alliance – About Us – Security and Sanitation," *Times Square Alliance*, 15 Jan 2005 <[http://www.timessquarenyc.org/about\\_us\\_security.html](http://www.timessquarenyc.org/about_us_security.html)>.

<sup>82</sup> Since the Times Square Alliance was founded, violent crime in Times Square has fallen by eighty five percent, whereas non-violent crime has fallen by sixty two percent.

<sup>83</sup> "Giuliani's Quality of Life Campaign," *ABC News Online*, 20 Dec. 2005 <<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/homeless991128.html>>.

by the pedestrian whilst navigating the city. The Manhattanite commuter would no longer have to face the daily worry of having his or her pocket being picked whilst travelling on a crowded subway train, or for that matter, being harassed by vagrants bedding down for the night on the sidewalk. As Giuliani told a local radio station, “Streets do not exist in civilized societies for the purpose of people sleeping there[...]Bedrooms are for sleeping.”<sup>84</sup> This is made highly apparent in Times Square itself, where flat surfaces once suitable for bedding down on are now covered with metal studs or spikes in order to make them as uncomfortable as possible.

This sanitised version of ‘the crossroads of the world’ bears little resemblance to the dangerous, seedy Times Square captured in films such as John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) or Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), or indeed the works of Huncke or Wojnarowicz. Outside of the Warner Brothers Store at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue stands a bronze sculpture. The sculpture depicts Daffy Duck wearing a long overcoat, the lining of which is festooned with watches for sale. The trade of fake watches and bags continues in Times Square today, the sellers carting their wares from corner to corner in trolleys in an attempt to avoid the authorities. Somewhat ironically, the erection of the statue is a nod to the illicit street trade synonymous with ‘old’ Times Square which new businesses, such as Warner Brothers, fund the Times Square Alliance to stamp out.

As the shadows continue to recede in a post 9/11 sanitized Manhattan, the shadow population hunt for cover. Areas which long resisted gentrification such as uptown Washington Heights, New York’s murder capital in the nineties, are now

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<sup>84</sup> “Giuliani’s Quality of Life Campaign”.

home to floor-thru apartments.<sup>85</sup> A move outward to the Bronx, Queens or Brooklyn is not uncommon, yet even areas such as Williamsburg, billed in the nineties as showing signs of becoming a 'new' Greenwich Village, has not escaped plans for a 'clean-up'.

In terms of surveillance and respectability it is clear that at street level, those who conform are overlooked, whilst those who fail to conform are heavily scrutinized, or forced to move on. In this environment, businessmen like Patrick Bateman can move undetected, whilst the shadow population must seek out new un-policed territories, such as beneath the city streets.

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<sup>85</sup> A property, often found in a brownstone where two or more apartments have been converted into one living space which runs from the front of the building to the rear, usually taking up the whole floor.

## Chapter 5

“I must profit from his darkness....”:<sup>1</sup> Gentrification and the New York Flâneur

On the Bowery between Spring and Princes Streets stands what was originally the YMCA building, constructed in 1885. The *ALA guide to New York City* describes this building as a “romantic red brick and Nova Scotia sandstone Queen Anne minor extravaganza intended to reform by its appearance alone.”<sup>2</sup> Following the YMCA’s sale of the premises in 1932, the building provided living quarters for artists and writers such as Ferdinand Leger, Mark Rothko and William S. Burroughs. Burroughs nicknamed the old locker room apartment at 222 The Bowery “the old bunker” on account of the fact that it had no windows. Bill Morgan notes that Burroughs’ “subterranean visitors included Ginsberg, Mick Jagger and Andy Warhol.”<sup>3</sup> Morgan also points out that across the street stood Fred Bunz’s diner which Kerouac described as “the great bum’s Howard Johnsons of the Bowery.”<sup>4</sup>

The section of the Bowery between East 4<sup>th</sup> St. and Delancey Street has been synonymous with poverty throughout the history of New York City. Forming the western border of the Lower East Side, successive waves of poor immigrants would have walked this street: starting in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the first free African Americans, followed by Irish, then Jews from eastern Europe. As Luc Sante points out, this influx led to a housing shortage, as immigrants were “dumped” in “dire conditions...with as many as four or five families...routinely housed in apartments intended for one.”<sup>5</sup> Flophouses began to spring up on The Bowery, offering a range of sleeping arrangements: a cot for twenty-five cents a night, through to a sleeping space on the floor for five cents.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Olds, “On the Subway,” *The Gold Cell* (New York: Knopf, 1987) 56.

<sup>2</sup> White and Willensky 87.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan 111.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan 111.

<sup>5</sup> Sante 33.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a flophouse continues to offer sleeping space to those down on their luck for between seven and ten dollars a night. Yet the area surrounding the flophouse offers a fascinating study of New York gentrification. On the same block as the flophouse, between Rivington and Stanton Streets, stands the original Bowery Mission, which has been offering help to the homeless since 1879. Only a few doors down at 217 Bowery resides the rather distastefully named Club Mission. An editorial review exclaims triumphantly, "Guest lists and fashionistas have made it to the Bowery."<sup>6</sup>

Further exploration proves more of the same. Lenny Kravitz's exclusive new club has opened a block up from the old Y. The infamous Slide bar is still in existence around the corner, a cellar hangout for gay New Yorkers since the 1890s offering rent boys and 'fairy' servers. However, the attention is drawn towards The Remote Lounge across the street, which offers revellers state of the art surveillance equipment, with which they can spy on one another.

Between East Houston and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue stands the Liz Christy Garden, a reminder of The Bowery's not so distant past. The garden was created by the Green Guerrillas in 1974, who tossed seed filled water balloons into empty lots on the Lower East Side. The garden is currently being threatened by an upscale housing development which plans to extend buildings adjacent to the plot, Avalon Christy Place offering 360 rental units. Further loft living will be offered at 195 The Bowery with a sixteen-story condo.<sup>7</sup>

In many respects the two novels examined in this chapter, *Girls. Visions and Everything* (1986) by Sarah Schulman and *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton

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<sup>6</sup> "Mission New York," *Citysearch*, 11 Apr. 2005 <<http://newyork.citysearch.com/profile/35819028>>.

<sup>7</sup> "Avalon Christy Place," *New York Metro*, 13 Apr. 2005  
<<http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/realstate>>.

Ellis, are worlds apart. Schulman's novel is romantic, mourning a lost generation (the Beats) and the rapid disintegration of the tightly knit lesbian community. The tone of the novel is a melancholic one. Schulman's protagonist Lila Futuransky's wandering can be seen as a desperate attempt to retrieve and reconstruct the few remaining fragments of the pre-gentrified Lower East Side. However, it is apparent throughout the novel that Lila and her liberal lesbian peers are ultimately powerless when it comes to stopping the spread of gentrification. Even with the 'garden in the rubble', discussed later, when members of Lila's neighbourhood win a minor victory over city planners who are attempting to gain control of their community garden, there is a sense that as with the Liz Christie Garden, the lot will eventually be encroached upon or re-allocated for commercial use. Schulman herself appears to sombrely accept the fate of Lila's community. *Girls, Visions and Everything* is by no means a call to arms. It demonstrates the vulnerability of Lila and her community, acknowledging that they *cannot* stop the consumption of their neighbourhood. *American Psycho*, on the other hand, is a very different take on rapacious capitalism in nineteen eighties New York. There are a number of stark contrasts between the two novels. Whereas Schulman centres on community, Ellis's focus is that of brutal individualism. Ellis's wild satire introduces Patrick Bateman as the most hideous version of the eighties yuppie. It is immediately apparent that although Bateman and Futuransky both live in Manhattan, they inhabit entirely different worlds. Whilst Futuransky worries about how to pay her ever-increasing rent, materialist Bateman's anxieties consist of ensuring that he has a more expensive *business card* than any of his contemporaries. Bateman's wealth buys him protection within the cityspace. The high-rise midtown apartment block in which he resides is guarded. Transport throughout the city comes in the form of a limousine. Conversely, Lila's poverty leaves her vulnerable, threatened with burglary and

eviction in the domestic sphere and queer bashing, rape and possible murder in the public sphere.

Most significantly, it is the slasher element of *American Psycho* which drives a wedge between the two novels. *Girls, Visions and Everything* can be thought of as a reflective, deeply nostalgic work, whereas Ellis, regardless of whether Bateman is cataloguing his wardrobe or mutilating one of his victims, adopts a deadpan monotone narrative throughout. This lack of modulation creates a distinct sense of indifference.

Throughout the course of the novel, Bateman, amongst other things, cuts off a victim's lips with scissors, coaxes a rat into the vagina of a semiconscious woman, and slits the throat of a five year old at the zoo taking pleasure in watching him die by pretending that he is a doctor. Horrific passages such as these are almost seamlessly interspersed with prolonged banal discussion regarding designer labels, high-class New York venues, and popular recording artists such as Phil Collins, Huey Lewis and Whitney Houston.

The fact that these two novels are so diverse in attitude, tone and content begs the question as to why they are paired together in this chapter. With regards to the flâneur, both novels are about reading the street. As gentrification spreads through Lila's neighbourhood, unfamiliar faces appear. With the influx of strangers, Lila finds it increasingly difficult to ascertain who poses a threat at street level: Cops pose as drug dealers and gay men cruising in order to clean up the area, middle class kids play at being punks. *American Psycho* discusses the same forces, yet from an opposing perspective. Bateman himself is unreadable. On the street, there are no distinguishable signs of the violent threat which he poses to the female walker, to the vagrant and so forth. Yet beneath the Armani suit, Bateman is a beast.



Aside from focusing upon representation of threat and identity in *Girls*, *Visions and Everything* and *American Psycho*, the pairing of these two novels also facilitates a close examination of the empathic flâneur versus the parasitic flâneur. With Lila, we are offered a wanderer who has a close allegiance with the community she surveys. With Bateman, Ellis creates a caricature of capitalist desire, a predatory flâneur, a cannibalistic consumer. This chapter assesses the function of these two oppositional characters in terms of their relationship with the cityspace.

Lila Futuransky, in *Girls*, *Visions and Everything*, lives on the Lower East Side, between The Bowery and Alphabet City. The area, which Schulman depicts as a once tightly knit gay and lesbian community, is now being threatened by the insurgence of the yuppie culture of the nineteen eighties: art galleries, designer restaurants and loft living. Patrick Bateman, protagonist of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, is representative of this threat; a materialistic glutton who takes all that he desires. As we discover, at street level Bateman the Wall Street broker is an animalistic predator, whilst Futuransky, a lesbian working for minimum wage, can certainly be thought of as prey. This in turn leads to a wider discussion of power – namely the manner in which the dominant classes feed upon society's excluded others. In her poem "On the Subway" (1983), former Poet Laureate of New York State, Sharon Olds, articulates this uneasy relationship between privileged and underprivileged. The poem is set in a deserted subway carriage, where Olds is confronted by a black youth. She immediately deems the youth to have the "casual cold look of a mugger."<sup>8</sup>

While issues of race as well as poverty are clearly central here, the most important dimension of this poem, in terms of the focus of this final chapter, is the

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<sup>8</sup> Olds, "On the Subway".

imbalance of power between rich and poor. In the empty subway carriage, the black youth holds the power to intimidate, mug, rape or kill, yet if we consider the carriage to be a microcosm of society, it is clearly Olds who has the upper hand. We need look no further than the aforementioned gentrification of The Bowery to understand Olds' line "the way I am living off his life". Both the youth and Olds herself are depicted as predatory animals distinguishing status by interpreting signals of dominance and submission. The youth's face or skin is raw, almost as if she has stripped the fur from his body in order to fashion her coat. She feels that the youth is eyeing the luxury items which she has in her possession. Yet most significantly, it is Olds who has the power to "eat the steak he does not eat...[take] the food from his mouth." The following lines sum up the rapacious nature of the dominant classes, which is explored in this chapter:

...And he is black  
and I am white, and without meaning or  
trying to I must profit from his darkness....<sup>9</sup>

These lines apply closely to the forces at play in both Schulman and Ellis's novels: the manner in which the power struggle between rich and poor is played out at street level, and ultimately how 'otherness' is consumed in New York City.

*Girls, Visions and Everything* follows Futuransky as she explores 1980s Manhattan, "the most beautiful woman she had ever known" (*GVE*, 35). The title of the novel is a quotation from *On the Road* and reflects the manner in which Lila models herself upon the Kerouacian explorer. As with Kerouac, the fundamental

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<sup>9</sup> Olds, "On the Subway".

objectives of Lila's quest are "girls, visions and everything"<sup>10</sup> and as Sally Munt points out in her review of the novel, like Kerouac. "Lila is similarly self exploratory on her adventure, but hers is based on a *female* erotic aesthetic,"<sup>11</sup> albeit one that appropriates heterosexual iconography. Carrying a copy of *On the Road* in her back pocket, Lila explores the Lower East Side with the intention of capturing that same spontaneity and freedom of movement romanticized by Kerouac and the Beats. The narrator informs us:

Guys like Jack, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, some of them were smart and had some good ideas... Mostly though, they weren't all the geniuses their reputation implied. The thing was they had made a phenomenon of themselves, made themselves into fashion, each one quoting from the other, building an image based not so much on their work as on the idea they led interesting lives. Lila firmly believed that was exactly what lesbians needed to do. (*GVE*, 59-60)

Consequently, Lila sets out to mythologize the Lower East Side lesbian community of the nineteen eighties as the Beats mythologized the counter culture of Greenwich Village and its inhabitants. Lila's gravitation towards Kerouac is arguably related to Beat Generation representations of masculinity, camaraderie and outsidership, epitomised by iconic photographs of Jack and Neal Cassady taken by Neal's wife Carolyn in 1952.<sup>12</sup> There are clear disparities between Beat and lesbian outsidership,

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<sup>10</sup> The title of the novel is taken from the following passage in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: "I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew that there'd be girls, visions and everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me." Kerouac, *On the Road* 14

<sup>11</sup> Sally Munt, "Schulman, Sarah," *GLBQT: An Encyclopaedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Theory*, ed. Claude J. Summers, 2002, GLBTQ Inc., Chicago, 20 Apr. 2005  
[http://www.glbqt.com/literature/schulman\\_s.html](http://www.glbqt.com/literature/schulman_s.html).

<sup>12</sup> Gifford and Lee, *Jack's Book* 205.

namely the manner in which the Beat's social exclusion was willed<sup>13</sup> rather than forced.

Nevertheless, Lila identifies with Kerouac's heavily male bias, with its homoerotic undertow. She appropriates and distorts this stereotype of American masculinity. By putting on the clothes synonymous with Kerouac and his contemporaries, such as lumberjack shirts or chinos, she signifies herself as being as much 'bulldagger' as she is Beat. She asks herself what she would do if she were Jack Kerouac and concludes that a vital part of the mythologization process is the act of walking. Adopting a similar tactic to Kerouac in "New York Scenes," Lila walks without purpose. Her encounters, the spectacles that she witnesses, are left completely to chance. Like Kerouac, she uses the power of her gaze in order to transform her compatriots into heroes and heroines, buildings into landmarks. Bumping into lesbian friends on the street such as Emily or Nancy is comparative to Sal Paradise (Kerouac) bumping into Carlo Marx (Ginsberg) or the elusive Elmo Hassel (Huncke). Lila's local, "The Kitsch Inn," is transformed into a lesbian mecca, in the same manner in which Kerouac made The White Horse Tavern a Beat mecca. Most importantly, however, Lila's walking is an experiment to challenge whether the New York City of the nineteen eighties can still offer "Girls, Visions and Everything" to a twenty-six year old Jewish lesbian in the same manner it did to a Franco-American male from Lowell, Massachusetts in the early nineteen fifties.

The opening line of the novel reads: "Lila Futuransky always knew she wanted to be an outlaw, but she could never figure out which one" (*GVE*, 3). Branding Lila an outlaw at such an early stage is significant. Apart from occasional recreational drug usage, her actions within the novel could not be considered *illegal*.

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<sup>13</sup> Both Ginsberg and Burroughs could be considered as already part of society's excluded 'others,' on account of them being gay. As Beats, they turn their exclusion into a virtue.

Yet she remains comparable to the Wild West outlaw, in the sense that she operates *outside* the unspoken laws of the city. Setting her *sexual* ‘dissidence’ aside for a moment, Lila rejects accepted patterns of work, deciding to wander when she is expected to be typing at her desk. She dresses unconventionally, “half queer, half punk,” with spiky cropped hair, leather jacket, tight jeans, and heavy “fuck off” boots (as opposed to ‘feminine’ ‘fuck me’ shoes). And in true ‘city western’ style she hangs out with other ‘outlaws,’ namely drugs dealers.

### **The Lesbian Flâneur and the Street(walker)**

The way in which Lila dresses and conducts herself could easily be labelled ‘butch drag,’ epitomised by her haircut, aggressively masculine but with a queer edge. Actions such as walking wherever she wants whenever she wants, becoming a ‘sexual adventurer’ and casually fraternising with the criminal underworld can also be interpreted as an extension of this ‘performed’ machismo. In terms of *flânerie*, Munt argues that Lila’s appearance as ‘bulldagger’ is much more than an overturning of expected (heterosexual) societal conduct. It is also a form of protection. Munt quotes George Sand’s recollections of lesbian cross dressing from *Story of my Life*.<sup>14</sup> Sand “voguing in her butch dandy suit” wrote that her “clothes feared nothing...no one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me.”<sup>15</sup> The putting on of men’s clothes for Sand allowed her to walk unnoticed and untrammelled. It offers her male privileges without actually being a man. In terms of attire alone, Sand writes. “I can’t express the pleasure my boots gave me, I could have slept with them...”<sup>16</sup> As with Lila, the subtle switch from ‘women’s wear’ to ‘men’s wear’ aids her stride, allowing her to take the masculine trajectory of the road.

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<sup>14</sup> George Sand, *Story of my Life*, ed. Thelma Jurgrau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 893–4.

<sup>15</sup> Munt, “The Lesbian Flâneur,” 116–7.

<sup>16</sup> Munt, “The Lesbian Flâneur,” 116.

Lesbian cross dressing is not without its drawbacks. In Terry Castle's introduction to *The Apparitional Lesbian* she writes:

When it comes to lesbians – or so I argue in the following chapters – many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost' effect in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is at the center of the screen. Some may deny she exists at all...The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away and she is dire.<sup>17</sup>

Given a perfunctory glance at Castle's depiction of the "Apparitional Lesbian," we could be forgiven for thinking that she was attempting to describe the flâneur, particularly in phrases such as "in the shadows, in the margins...a wanderer in the dusk." Castle's assertion that the lesbian body becomes marginalized in heterosexual society to the extent that it becomes transparent, almost absent, correlates closely with Sand's tale of lesbian cross-dressing. By putting on male attire, Sand makes herself 'invisible'. She is not seen on the street as a woman, let alone a lesbian woman, but as a man. She has erased her identity in order to 'ghost' her 'queer' body through the heterosexual streets. In 1831, when homosexuality was outlawed, being "elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot," was of course a necessity for the homosexual wanderer. For Lila, however, 'ghosting' is not necessarily the answer. Yes, she wants to play at being the Kerouacian flâneur, and walk the streets untouched; yet simultaneously she wants recognition as a *lesbian* walker. To use Castle's terminology she wants to bring

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Castle, "The Apparitional Lesbian," *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (London and New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 28-9.

lesbianism 'out of the shadows', 'authenticate' the lesbian body in the heterosexual street. Her clothes therefore reflect this sentiment. Her butch appearance does not blur gender to the extent that she could be mistaken for a man, yet her masculine 'fuck off' boots aggressively advise potential hecklers to do just that, whilst her haircut, labrys earring and pinky ring are clear signifiers of her sexuality.

Despite her appearance, it becomes clear that certain age old stereotypes of the female walker are difficult to dispel. Whilst out walking Lila is repeatedly mistaken for a prostitute.

...she was walking home on Chrystie Street in the middle of the afternoon through Chinatown's warehouse district and two trucks drove by.

"Going out? Going out?"

She decided it was an honest mistake. Why else would a woman be walking down the street wearing a shoulder bag?

The next day she was on the corner of Tenth Street and Third Avenue waiting to make a phone call when a guy drove up in a cab.

"Hey you. Get in," he yelled out the window.

"I'm not a prostitute," Lila said. "She's a prostitute," pointing to the woman standing in the next phone booth.

"Oh," he said, shifting his gaze. "Hey you. Get in." (*GVE*, 141)

What is interesting here is the manner in which Lila identifies the prostitute, but the men can't tell the difference. Her eye is more educated than that of the john, she has the ability to read the street more accurately. In "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue," Samuel Delany discusses the esoteric signals which pass between *male* hustlers and potential johns: "If you look in his direction long enough, and no cops around he

might reach between his baggy black jeans and casually squeeze his crotch in a way that could mean he is just scratching, but also shows what's under the denim. If you smile he might smile back, come over and start a conversation.”<sup>18</sup> It appears the only signal a man needs for a woman to be presumed a prostitute is for her to be walking or appearing to loiter. Of course, location and time of day matters. A woman standing outside The Plaza at midday is probably trying to hail a cab, rather than hustle for trade. However, in areas such as the Lower East Side, Chinatown's warehouse district, or Tenth and Third, where it is considered dangerous for women to walk alone, even during the day, the female walker is inevitably branded a whore. This in turn demonstrates the manner in which location itself produces identity. With Manhattan, the neighbourhoods and micro-communities impose different meanings on the individual as he or she moves. In her own neighbourhood she is recognised as a lesbian, a few blocks north, her identity has shifted to the extent that she is mistaken for a prostitute, a few blocks north again on Broadway, she will be overlooked as a shopper or a tourist. As with every other walker in Manhattan, she cannot control the transience of her identity. It is determined by a multitude of factors regarding how those around her read and interpret the neighbourhood in which she is walking.

What must be considered, however, is that Lila *lives* in what most would term a dangerous area. Regardless of the fact she is a self-confessed flâneur, economic factors dictate that she *must* walk the streets of the Lower East Side. She cannot afford a cab, and if she is to ride the subway, she must first of all walk to a station. As discussed in the previous chapter, for the poor, walking is obligatory. Fellow impoverished residents of Lila's neighbourhood presumably recognise this fact and

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<sup>18</sup> Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* 10.



therefore have less chance of mistaking her walking as a display of prostitution. It is the outsider, the vehicle owner, the higher earner, that attempts to cruise her.

The narrator repeatedly refers to Lila's predicament in attempting to walk in what is rapidly becoming a 'closed city'. The cause of this phenomenon appears to be the growing gap between rich and poor:

No moving around like the old days. New York is closed. Pretty soon its just going to be bag ladies and rich people stepping over them, plus a few old timers hiding out in their rent controlled apartments hoping no one's gonna notice. For everybody else the city is closed. (*GVE* 105)

Unlike Ginsberg's "Mugging," where the threat comes from the poor, for Schulman it is the rich that pose the most significant threat to the flâneur's freedom of movement. Setting aside intimidation from cruising johns, as discussed later, Lila is confronted by a gang of rich kids playing at punks who threaten to queer bash her. Those displaying 'otherness' on the street are taunted or abused, whilst those who cannot afford the raising rental costs are thrown from their homes: "Lila knew that New York was closed; once she gave up an apartment she'd never find another one" (*GVE* 50).

### **Gentrification and the Garden in the Rubble**

In chapter six of the novel, we accompany Lila on one of her many walks through the city. We are introduced to an issue which pervades the novel in multifarious layers: the gentrification of queer space. As Lila turns down Sixth Street to Avenue B, the "crawling invasion of gentrification" (*GVE*, 19) is highly apparent. The narrator admits that once Lila had passed by the "stupid art galleries, it was still a nice block" (*GVE*, 19). However, the adjacent Avenue A, which she now deems unliveable, serves as a stark reminder of what Avenue B will eventually become. The

old-fashioned “Good Humor Man” has been replaced by “tofu” selling teenaged boys,” and the pop soda fountains featuring “Breyers’s Ice Cream” have “bowed to the pressure of imported ices” (*GVE*, 19). The commercialisation and consequent homogenisation of marginal spaces, such as Avenue A, will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Before discussing how and why queer space becomes gentrified through the influx of chain stores, art galleries and designer apartment buildings, it is first necessary to grasp how the city endeavours to control the production of existing marginal spaces.

Lila continues down Avenue B. After passing an Irish Bar, a few bodegas, the ‘Jesse Jackson for President’ campaign headquarters and a thrift shop, she arrives at a former vacant lot which “for years was full of garbage” and used to serve as a “shooting gallery for junkies” (*GVE*, 19). After recognising the three dark silhouettes “laughing and talking in the rubble” to be her friends Sally, Lacy and Muriel, Lila stumbles towards them through the piles of bricks. To her surprise, she finds herself amongst a series of little gardens filled with “marigolds and tomato plants.” She learns that these patches had been created by the women who had “gone out with pick axes and lemonade, digging up little sections of the dead earth and bringing it back to life again” (*GVE*, 20). The gardens had become a spot where members of the community, both gay and straight gathered to drink wine, smoke joints and spend hours telling “tall tales” (*GVE*, 20). Then, Sally recounts:

...this lady walked up in brand new blue jeans and told us that the City of New York is so proud of our garden that they have decided to adopt it into The Green Apple Program. She handed us a little plaque of a green apple and then told us she was our official organizer... Then, last Friday, this woman came back and announced that from now on all the

gardens had to be square and ours is round. So, she demanded that we take it apart and make it square. (*GVE*, 21)

The garden is an example of space which has been produced by society's excluded others. In "(Re)Negotiating the Heterosexual Street: Lesbian Productions of Space," Valentine adopts Judith Butler's argument that "gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>19</sup> She then applies this argument to urban space, asserting that in a similar manner the street is assumed to be 'naturally' or 'authentically' heterosexual. Valentine argues that a host of assumptions concerning what constitutes proper behaviour congeal over time to give the appearance of a proper or normal production of space. In this manner, the "heterosexing" of the street "is a performative act naturalized through repetition and regulation."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the construction of the garden in the rubble can be seen as a subversive act, an attempt to 'denaturalise' or 'queer' the heterosexual street. The garden must therefore be 'regulated', and this of course is where the female organiser from the "Green Apple Program" appears demanding that the plot of land be made square.

Initially, the "little plaque of a green apple" which is bestowed upon them could be misinterpreted as a reward for their endeavours. After all, they have voluntarily cleaned up a disused garbage filled plot which was once used by junkies. The garden reflects, amongst other things, a community interest in street maintenance, a will to maintain street safety by ejecting hard drug users, and a will to promote togetherness, regardless of racial or sexual difference. However, far from being a

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<sup>19</sup> Gill Valentine, "(Re)Negotiating the Heterosexual Street: Lesbian Productions of Space," *BodySpace*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996) 146.

<sup>20</sup> Valentine 146.

reward, the plaque can be seen as the equivalent of a colonial flag implanted into the garden's turf. It is an attempt to facilitate the homogenisation of the garden and to control those who dared to 'queer' the space in the first place. The garden must be square; its edges must be regulated, *straightened*. It cannot be irregular, circular, curved or, indeed 'bent'. Its 'otherness' must be eradicated, or at least disguised, so that the facade of a 'natural' (heterosexual) production of space can be perpetuated.

After Sally and the other gardeners resist the "Green Apple Program," the city calls them to a meeting in an attempt to coerce them into changing the plot of land. The gardeners put forward a proposal to keep their garden round, which the city in turn rejects, as it goes against "THE PLAN" (*GVE*, 21). The meeting promptly ends with Sally screaming "YOU FACISTS, ONLY FASCISTS MAKE PEOPLE HAVE SQUARE GARDENS" (*GVE*, 21). Muriel confides later, "We hope they'll stay away but with the city, you never know. We'll be here a lot this summer...holding down the fort" (*GVE*, 21). The once trivial space of the disused lot becomes a bastion of resistance. The lot becomes (an)other space which, to paraphrase Valentine, cuts into and disrupts 'normality'. It is a space where 'other' desires are performed, contrary to those deemed 'authentic' by the city. The desire to have a round garden, rather than a square one, becomes equated with the desire to have a same sex relationship rather than a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The individual should have freedom of choice, without persecution. Yet we must also take note from Valentine that "authentic lesbian and gay space is [usually] relegated to the margins of the ghetto and the back street bar."<sup>21</sup> It is highly apparent in *Girls, Visions and Everything* that as soon as members of the gay and lesbian community endeavour to (re)produce space within the proximity of mainstream society, it is snatched away from them. This

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<sup>21</sup> Valentine 146.

is certainly true with regards to the garden, which can be seen as posing a 'visible' threat due to its front (as opposed to back) street location on Avenue B.

### ***"Real Survival Issues"***

Similar results occur when Lila and her "faggot friend" Elliot decide to make an office space for lesbian and gay writers in the East Village, an area where "lesbian and gay writers had always flourished but never had an office" (*GVE*, 27). Once again after contacting an East Village housing organization they are appointed an 'organizer,' Mark, who does his best to discourage them from going ahead with their plans:

I'm your organizer. I personally have nothing against homosexuals, but I don't think that the other people involved in this building project would want to work with you...they're concerned with real survival issues. (*GVE*, 27)

"Real survival issues," is of course a reference to the homeless, or poverty stricken. Competition for recognition amongst the city's excluded others is a thread which runs throughout the fabric of the novel. This is most apparent at the June 8<sup>th</sup> protest march where each individual group is competing to be heard. Lesbian marchers chanting "Cruise People, Not Missiles...Two-Four-Six-Eight, Smash the Family, Smash the State" are drowned out by t-shirted men with megaphones repeating, "No Draft, No War, US Out of El Salvador" (*GVE*, 83). Similarly, Mark attempts to trivialize Lila and Elliot's project by pitting the lesbian and gay writers office against the 'real survival issues' of the homeless. It must be noted however, that as with the garden in the rubble, the building which Lila and Elliot intended to renovate had been "sitting abandoned for years" (*GVE*, 27). In this time, the city had made no plans to convert it into a homeless shelter. Yet, as soon as Lila and Elliot approach with their plan, they

are suddenly competing for the space against New York's 'more needy' excluded others.

Finally, they are given the go ahead to commence work. The gay and lesbian volunteers put in three hundred hours of physical labour, all of which is overseen by their 'supervisor,' who spends the entire time fiddling with the lock on the front door. When the building is finally made inhabitable, the writers turn up to find a "strange lock" (*GVE*, 28) on the front door. What has happened is initially unclear.

Nevertheless, over the following weeks they witness "the landlord moving in hordes of rich bitch tenants into their nice, clean apartments" (*GVE*, 28). The city finally makes the excuse that they had heard the volunteers were using needles in the building. Yet, even if this were the case, why give the building over to executive tenants? What ever happened to the city's concern with real survival issues?

### **The Reallocation of Space**

Later in the novel Lila bumps into Solomon, a drugs dealer who works at the corner of her street. He informs her that her landlord is looking to double the rent in an attempt to encourage his tenants to move out. "You better watch out...[He's] trying to sell it. He's asking seven hundred thousand dollars...This is landlord city...One hundred and fifty percent landlord city" (*GVE*, 99). Still later, Lila wanders past the old Orchardia, what was once the world's only Ukrainian-Italian restaurant. "The landlord had increased the rent five hundred percent and thrown the owner out on her ass after thirty-two years. There was a rumour that Chirping Chicken was getting ready to open a store on that very spot..." (*GVE*, 172). Yet Lila envisages this problem to be caused not by the landlords, but by the "ART SCENE which was oozing its slime all over Second Avenue. The upscale New-Yorkers who cabbed it down to the fancy spaces to see performers on tour from Europe...It was an invading

homogenous monster composed of a lot of boring people thinking they were leading wacky lives" (*GVE*, 43).

The invasion of the art crowd, and the subsequent commercialisation and gentrification of the Lower East Side, has a significant effect upon the lesbian flâneur. The previous examples illustrate how Lila is threatened in the private sphere: the prospect of being evicted from her home, her potential office building being given over to richer tenants. The invasion of the "homogenous monster" also has significant consequences at street level. Obvious aesthetic alterations of course include the insertion of a 'Chirping Chicken' fast food outlet where a charismatic old restaurant once stood. Other subtle changes in the layout below 14<sup>th</sup> street also begin to occur. For instance, when Lila and her friends go out partying, "four fearless dykes out on the Friday night streets of their own turf" (*GVE*, 61), it soon becomes apparent that the streets are becoming less and less their own. After wandering for a considerable amount of time, they end up at a party of "gentrified straight people" (*GVE*, 62). Lila discovers to the rear of the building a patio constructed where the back alley used to be. This seemingly casual reassignment of space speaks volumes in terms of how the Lower East Side is being transformed to meet the values of the invading bourgeoisie. To the middle class newcomer the back alley is a stark reminder of the area before the gentrification process began. It is dark, litter-strewn, the perfect setting for a mugging or worse. Consequently its inherent danger is neutralized. It is seized and converted from a semi-public space into a private space. After all, what could be less threatening than a plant pot dotted patio? Yet as Munt points out, this is one of the many examples of the novel's "disillusionment with the postmodernist models of space.

wherein public and private are collapsed on to the street, and the space is being used by different people in different ways.”<sup>22</sup>

For Lila, the collapse of private space onto the street has numerous negative connotations. It is an appropriation of her turf not only as a lesbian, but also as a flâneur. At the beginning of chapter six she states that “it was becoming harder and harder to find a quiet street” (*GVE*, 19) on the Lower East Side. This is hardly surprising when even the back alleys, the spaces to which homosexuals are traditionally pushed by middle class conventionalism, are being ‘privatised’. Yet setting aside the encroachment on what Munt terms a “Sapphic paradise”<sup>23</sup> the construction of the patio also forms a solitary obstruction to Lila’s personal freedom of movement throughout the city. If wandering is the flâneur’s lifeblood, then the patio can be seen as a blockage in one of the city’s many capillaries. The space has been reassigned to resist freedom of passage, thus forcing the walker back onto the main thoroughfares where his or her actions can be observed/monitored/policed with greater ease. Indeed, the reassignment of the alleyway can be seen as the first step towards obliterating a layer of ‘invisible’ New York, a way of smoking out those who, for one reason or another, wish to remain hidden.

### **‘Cleaning up’ the Lower East Side**

The gentrification process in general deploys a false altruism epitomized by the newly founded association that ‘cares’ for Lila’s block, “The Concerned Neighbors for a Cleaner Block” (*GVE*, 30). Block associations first became common in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century New York. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs extols the virtues of these associations which

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<sup>22</sup> Sally Munt, “‘Somewhere over the Rainbow...’ Postmodernism and the fiction of Sarah Schulman,” *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings*, (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1992) 43.

<sup>23</sup> Sally Munt, “The Lesbian Flâneur,” 114.



she ruefully admits were becoming more and more scarce by the 1950s. She cites the block association as peculiar to areas inhabited by the working classes. Here the residents see themselves as each playing a vital role in the safety and maintenance of the block and through their vigilance impose a “web of strong street law and order.”<sup>24</sup> Jacobs goes on to argue that the middle classes rarely partake in such street surveillance, revealing that when an altercation did happen to occur on her block “no eyes appeared in the windows of the high-rent, small apartment building. It was the only building of which this was true.”<sup>25</sup> Jacobs believes that richer property owners employ a network of staff, such as doormen: paid watchers who form a “hired neighbourhood.”<sup>26</sup> It is peculiar to find that, contrary to Jacobs’ findings, the invading middle classes in *Girls, Visions and Everything* take a vested interest in the ‘state’ of the street. However, it becomes rapidly apparent that as with the construction of the patio, the block association is yet another attempt to assert a bourgeois influence over the street space:

First they put up posters of a young white couple walking fearfully down a city street filled with menacing jungle animals, like baboons. The caption read “Clean Up Our Street”. It hadn’t taken Lila long to realise that any group of people who wanted to clean up another group were usually bad news” (*GVE*, 31).

The “Concerned Neighbors” main concern appears to be access to the area to which they have recently relocated. The poster which they display presents the young white, heterosexual couple as a social norm, the inference being that anyone contrary to this norm (black, homosexual and so on) are represented by the “jungle animals”

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<sup>24</sup> Jacobs 41.

<sup>25</sup> Jacobs 41.

<sup>26</sup> Jacobs 40.

which threaten their pleasant neighbourhood stroll. The poster, although less extreme, has clear links with those used by the Nazis as propaganda, depicting the progress of the Aryan race as being menaced by what they termed as *Untermenschen*.<sup>27</sup> In a similar manner, the middle classes are presented as having the desire to “clean up,” or at least clear out those who bring down the ‘tone’ of the neighbourhood. They begin by setting the cops onto the local drug dealers, even though the majority of the new residents, according to Lila, indulged in cocaine in the comfort of their own apartments. The “Concerned Neighbours” make the excuse that the dealers pose a threat to children living on the block, yet most tenants with young families have been evicted on account of not being able to pay the forever rising rent. The true motives for smoking out the dealers, who for Lila and her friends have been accepted as part of the street furniture, are firstly because they are black and secondly because they are representative of the pre-gentrified, ‘unclean’, ‘untamed’ Lower East Side. Lila calls the president of the “Concerned Neighbours” to complain:

“I like drugs, I use drugs. Anyway you can’t go around arresting every Black person who walks down the block”

“Listen Lila Futursky. I’m sick of your sixties-esque posturing. Just look out your window and you’ll see that you’re too late.”

He was right. There were two policemen on horseback clip-clopping merrily along.

“Don’t tell me you called in the Cossacks. Does this mean we’re occupied?”

“Yup”

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<sup>27</sup> Those deemed as *Untermenschen* or subhuman by the Nazis included, amongst others: Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, communists and trade unionists.

“Well just think about this... When there are too many drugs dealers, you call in the cops. But who are you going to call in when there are too many cops?” (*GVE*, 32)

Lila’s surprise and subsequent disgust at being “occupied” suggests a number of things. As with Baldwin’s Harlem, Lila does not appear to be accustomed to so strong a police presence in the Lower East Side. This in turn suggests that as with the other poorer areas within Manhattan occupied by the city’s excluded others, police vigilance is scarce. The result of this is, of course, the emergence of an outlaw culture. Unlike in Times Square, where characters such as Huncke have to be constantly on the look out for the police officer or plain-clothes detective, the dealer can pick his spot at the corner of the block and openly do business. Lila not only accepts the dealers on her block, Ray, Tony and Solomon, but develops a certain intimacy with them, after having to pass them each day. Somewhat ironically, the dealers impose a far more convincing “web of street law and order,” than the “Concerned Neighbors” who are trying to eject them. As Ray informs Lila, dealers “see everything that happens on the street,” (*GVE*, 24) and this indeed proves to be the case. At the climax of the novel it is Ray, rather than the police, who saves Lila and Emily from a queer bashing after they are accosted by rich kids playing at being punks. Similarly it is Solomon who warns Lila that her landlord may evict her. The dealers’ almost constant presence on the corner offers them a kind of omniscience which clearly benefits the inhabitants of the block and surrounding area.

The “street law” imposed by the dealers is presented as being far more desirable than that of police officers who come clip clopping down Lila’s street. Schulman depicts the cops as being present to protect the interests of new homeowners and landlords, whilst the dealers provide a neighbourhood watch for the

poorer tenants. In certain respects, it is clear that conventional policing could never be as effective as the network of dealers, considering that posting an officer at the corner of every block on the Lower East Side would be preposterous. Yet perhaps most importantly under “street law” the girls have certain freedoms which would not be tolerated under ‘occupation’. Lila’s use of the term ‘occupation’ again serves to perpetuate the fascist connotations behind the gentrification of queer space. What was once a space left open to outlaw culture – outlaw sexuality/race/desire – becomes, with the influx of wealthy tenants, a policed space. As Munt points out, Lila identifies primarily with Kerouac’s dream of being an outlaw, “reconstructed by a feminist consciousness captured within her separate subculture.”<sup>28</sup> An intrinsic part of the outlaw dream is, of course, the freedom to roam. Munt acknowledges that in *Girls, Visions and Everything* Lila displays the desire to roam, not only the streets, but “between lovers, friends and compatriots.”<sup>29</sup> The geography of the pre-gentrified Lower East Side made this possible. Lila presents what Munt terms a “nostalgia for streets filled with brothers and sisters sitting languidly on the stoop, swapping stories and cementing communitas...this is the feminisation of the street, the underworld with a human face.”<sup>30</sup> As the novel progresses this nostalgia slowly ebbs away.

### **Reactions to the Re-sexing of Heterosexual Space**

Throughout the novel we encounter heterosexual disapproval towards homosexual displays on the street. The disapproval comes in varying forms. When Lila and Emily kiss goodbye at the corner of Saint Mark’s Place a male voice splutters from the crowd, “you should be ashamed of yourself” (GVE, 93). This form of disapproval can be categorised as being the least intimidating. Rather than posing a

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<sup>28</sup> Munt, “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” 40.

<sup>29</sup> Munt, “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” 40.

<sup>30</sup> Munt, “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” 40.

direct threat, it is constructed similarly to the manner in which an adult would scold a child. It is intended to instil feelings of guilt, to make Lila and Emily reconsider their homosexual display as wrong and/or unacceptable in mainstream society.

The second form of disapproval comes with an explicit threat. For example, when Lila and Emily are making their way home hand in hand from the ice cream parlour, they overhear a conversation from a group of Latinos walking a few steps behind them: "That's gay liberation. They can do whatever they want whenever they want it...I've got a BIG COCK. See *mamacita*. I'd love to fuck your cunt...You suck each other's pussy right? I'll show you a cock that you'll never forget" (*GVE*, 157). This form of disapproval is similar to the previous, in so much as it can be seen as an attempt to 'straighten out' what the men see as unnatural sexuality. One of the Latinos offers Lila his "BIG COCK," almost as if allowing him to fuck her will make her rethink her sexuality, and therefore normalize her / dissipate her sexual 'otherness'. Nevertheless, the "BIG COCK" can be seen as a weapon, a method of chastising the women for breaking street level heterosexual protocol. As in a subsequent attack by rich kids parading as skinheads, the "largest, baldest skinhead" wields a "wooden board, like a weapon, holding it at his crotch and stroking it as if he was jerking off..." "just fuck me," he said drunkenly, "just fuck me" (*GVE*, 174). The implication is, of course, that if Lila and Emily do not agree to 'straight' sex, they will be punished: raped by the "BIG COCK" or beaten with the phallic wooden board.

Valentine quotes G.D. Comstock's essay "Victims of anti-gay/lesbian violence,"<sup>31</sup> stating that "To be gay or lesbian in America is to live in the shadow of violence." Each of these attacks are reactions against what heterosexuals see as the re-sexing (or queering) of heterosexual space. As Valentine points out, "whispers or

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<sup>31</sup> G. D. Comstock, "Victims of Anti-gay/Lesbian Violence," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 4.1 (1989): 101-106.

stares,” derogatory remarks or threats of physical abuse, are all methods employed to “make lesbians feel out of place in everyday spaces.”<sup>32</sup> As with the city’s attempts to take control of and reshape the garden in the rubble, the attacks can be seen as a further push toward the “removal of those who cut into and disrupt ‘normality’ of heterosexual space by performing their desires in a way that produces (an)other space.” (Valentine 148) Although public or semi-public space is accepted as inherently heterosexual, it is clear that it remains imprintable. Repeated performances of heterosexually accepted norms perpetuate and, over time, authenticate the ‘sexuality’ of the street. Yet when lesbians such as Lila and Emily hold hands or kiss, their bodies press against heterosexual space, challenging its ‘accepted’ form.

### **The Gay Pride March: The Temporary ‘bending’ of the Heterosexual Street**

One of the most effective examples of this (en masse) is the gay parade. In *Girls, Visions and Everything* Lila attends the Gay Pride March: “it was right there on the sidewalks of New York. Fifty thousand homosexuals flaunted it that day” (*GVE*, 126). As Valentine states, the “marchers pierce the complacency of heterosexual space” they “bend and queer space,”<sup>33</sup> ‘re-sexing’ not only the street but the surrounding semi-public spaces. Straight bars become filled with gay men and women, as do restaurants, burgers bars and shops. Drag queens walk the streets in relative safety: “Faggots knew how important it was for a man to be able to walk down the street wearing a dress and tried to articulate this to the rest of the world” (*GVE*, 108). Whereas any other day a man in a dress would be liable to verbal or physical attack, on parade day it is accepted/permitted/tolerated. As Helen points out in response to Lila’s greeting “it’s okay to be gay,” “yeah, but only for today. Tomorrow back to the same old shit” (*GVE*, 127).

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<sup>32</sup> Valentine 149.

<sup>33</sup> Valentine 152-3.

Helen's response raises a valid point. In approving the Gay Pride March, running from Columbus circle along Fifth to Christopher Street, the city accepts that heterosexual space will be appropriated, or 'queered', for one day. As Lila's friend Sheena states: "New York faggotry and dykeness will come out in all its grandeur. Fifth Avenue will be ours..." (*GVE*, 121) The police stop the traffic, protect the marchers from any potential threat from protesters, and thus facilitate this temporary encampment of sexual otherness in the cityplace. Yet at the end of the day the marchers will disperse to the city's enclaves, returning the streets as well as the bars, cafes and restaurants to their 'normal' state. If the marchers decided to occupy the heterosexual street for longer than the time designated to them by the city, acceptance would wilt into intolerance, and the police would be instructed to remove them. As Helen states, it is acceptable to be gay and out (in the city) for one day alone, yet the following day an individual's sexuality must once again become shrouded in order to escape persecution. The city once again becomes closed to 'otherness,' the 'Panopticon' reactivated.<sup>34</sup>

## Identity

The novel harks back to a time when the area could be thought of as a neighbourhood, in the sense that everyone knew or knew of everyone else. The influx of what Jacobs refers to as "extraneous people," police included, breaks down the community spirit. Jacobs reveals the high rent tenants that work in other parts of the

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<sup>34</sup> In "The Lesbian Flâneur," Munt compares walking in Nottingham to walking in Brighton, the gay capital of the south. Whereas Brighton gives her the permission to stare, Nottingham is "colder," and the 'public' space is "sexualised as privately heterosexual...Displays of intimacy over the purchase of family size commodities are exchanges of gazes calculated to exclude. When the gaze turns, its intent is hostile: visual and verbal harassment make me avert my eyes. I don't loiter, ever, the surveillance is turned upon myself, as the Panopticon imposes self vigilance." Munt, "The Lesbian Flâneur," 115.

city “are so transient that we cannot keep track of their faces.”<sup>35</sup> As more and more high rent tenants infiltrate the Lower East Side, more and more strangers appear, and as Jacobs states, strangers arouse suspicion and mistrust.

Important issues with regards to appearance are raised in chapter thirty of *Girls Visions and Everything*. After cutting off work, Lila finds herself sitting on a bench in Washington Square Park smoking a cigarette whilst watching passers by. At first the scene appears to be nothing out of the ordinary: drugs dealers and gay men cruising intermingle with “junkies...kids racing skateboards and chess players wildly hitting clocks in games where speed was everything” (*GVE*, 118). However, as the chapter progresses the thin veneer of normality is slowly peeled away. Our suspicions that all is not as it seems are raised when one of the dealers comes to sit next to Lila, whilst the other runs off to negotiate with one of his ‘associates’. After a short conversation, Lila turns to the dealer and says, “I don’t mean to deal in ethnic stereotypes or anything, but you kind of look like a cop yourself. Like, you’re too healthy or something. I don’t know why I said that. Maybe it’s the earring” (*GVE*, 118).

By the end of the chapter we learn that Lila’s observation is correct. Whilst leaving the park, Lila observes that the police have been involved in a double performance. Two additional undercover cops who were posing as gay men cruising have joined the so-called ‘dealer’. They are in the process of handcuffing the park’s genuine dealers and leading them off towards Bleeker Street. Lila is left open mouthed, the narrator informs us that “her skin turned so cold she forgot who she was” (*GVE*, 118). Lila suddenly realises that during her time in the park, the *true* identity of those surrounding her was far less ascertainable than she first imagined.

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<sup>35</sup> Jacobs 39.



‘Staged’ for a drugs bust, the park becomes filled with performers. The cop sitting beside Lila on the park bench, acts out the role of the drugs dealer, donning the appropriate costume: “a polyester double-knit, gold chain and rhinestone stud in his ear” (*GVE*, 117). Meanwhile, the other cops play at being gay men cruising, mimicking their fashions, mannerisms and walk. For Lila the ‘outlaw’, this is even more disconcerting than having mounted police ‘clip-clop’ up her street. The fact that the police have embedded themselves amongst society’s outcasts is a further restriction of personal freedom. In a city where cops play at being dealers or gay men cruising as a method of surveillance or criminal entrapment, no-one can be trusted.

The series of dual identities operating at street level which *Girls, Visions and Everything* reveals somewhat complicates the discussion of performance initiated in chapter two in relation to the Beats. As stated earlier, the Beat performance of another race was a way of excluding and liberating themselves from mainstream society. As with George Sand, Lila’s cross-dressing and appropriation of the traditionally male practice of *flânerie* is also a drive toward liberation through the performance of identity. Both acts are counter hegemonic to the extent that they ‘trouble’ that which is considered a ‘natural’ identity, in terms of race and gender respectively. As Butler states with regards to gender, performance or drag offers the opportunity to “compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender and sexuality.”<sup>36</sup> However, in *Girls, Visions and Everything*, the performance of identity is seen as a potentially liberating act, but also as a counter strategy of political control.

Butler comments on the manner in which marginal groups are controlled via “exclusion and domination.”<sup>37</sup> A method of domination is the ‘invisible’ infiltration of authority figures into the exclusion zone. As discussed in chapter one, section eight of

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 177.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 170.

“Song of Myself” features a policeman forcing his way to the centre of the crowd, a visible symbol of control. In twentieth century New York, the policeman would not be central, rather hidden amongst the “rous’d mobs.”<sup>38</sup> In order to police and dominate society’s excluded ‘others’ the authorities not only cross the geographic boundary which separates mainstream from marginal space, but also attempt to cross the ‘bodily’ division by appropriating the appearance of those whom they intend to survey and control.

### **The Capitalist Adventurer: Wealth and Invisibility**

As with the police in *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Patrick Bateman has also learnt to benefit from the city’s population of ‘invisible’ folk. In terms of policing, the forces of respectability take on the disguise of criminals in order to make arrests. Conversely, Bateman appears to be respectable, yet he is a psychopathic killer. Taking this into consideration, the street becomes utterly unreadable. Individuals who appear to pose a threat are potentially undercover law enforcers, whilst seemingly placid, law-abiding citizens can prove to be dangerous felons.

The theme of display and concealment, addressed in the previous chapter, is also amplified here. It is clear that criminals such as drug dealers are policeable, to the extent that they must at some point display their intention to sell on the street. These signs can be spotted by addicts, but also by the police themselves. A character such as Bateman is clearly unpoliceable. Patrolling officers and urban surveillance equipment scan the streets for undesirables. The impeccably dressed Wall St. broker would undoubtedly be overlooked. Schulman outlines that the police begin to patrol Lila’s street only when gentrification is taking hold. This suggests that law enforcement functions primarily to protect the interests of property owners, developers, the

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<sup>38</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass* 36.

wealthy; people such as Bateman himself.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Bateman's wealth shrouds him in invisibility. He provides little visual clue on the street as to his brutal intentions. Generally, his victims are lured to exclusive high-rise apartments, the most diabolical of his executions taking place high above street level.

In terms of affluence and visibility, Bateman shares a great deal with the Parisian dilettante of the nineteenth century. As we discover, he perhaps could be considered to be the only 'flâneur' examined within this thesis to somehow retain his invisibility. Bateman lives in Midtown Manhattan, depicted by Ellis as a wealth-driven and dog-eat-dog environment, living up to the graffiti "ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE...scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the chemical bank near the corner of Eleventh and First" (*Psycho*, 3). Nevertheless, whenever Bateman leaves his flat in the American Gardens Building on West 81<sup>st</sup> Street he could be considered completely invisible. On a trivial scale, this is exemplified by the fact that when he is hanging onto the rim of a trash can suffering from a panic attack in downtown Manhattan no one takes any notice: "bike messengers whiz by and I'm standing on a corner scowling at them, but people pass, oblivious, no one pays attention, they don't even pretend to *not* pay attention" (*Psycho*, 144). None of the passersby are concerned by his peculiar behaviour. Similarly, from a more serious perspective, when Bateman takes his "Soprani jacket, two white Brooks Brothers shirts and a tie from Agnes B still covered with flecks of someone's blood" (*Psycho*, 78) to the drycleaners no one asks any questions, even though this seems to be a regular occurrence, "I usually send my bloody clothes to be delivered back to me" (*Psycho*, 78).

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<sup>39</sup> One example of this is post 9/11 Midtown Manhattan where two or more patrol cops are posted on the corner of almost every block. The officers have been drafted in from the poorer outer boroughs, which are now under policed.

## **“Go Back to Wall Street...Fucking Yuppie”: Bateman’s Urban Uniform**

In a city where socially excluded others such as Lila are under heavy surveillance, a member of the dominant class such as Bateman can declare in all honesty that he is into “murders and executions” (*Psycho*, 197) and be dismissed on the pretence that he is into “mergers and acquisitions”. There is a clear link between Bateman’s invisibility and his socio-economic status. For the white middle/upper class male, invisibility could be said to be symptomatic of life in the cityplace. Yes, he is an affluent businessman who, as we discuss later, is capable of buying *anything* he wants, yet as Fay Weldon points out as soon as he steps into his Wall Street ‘uniform’ he has joined “the hordes now wearing Armani.”<sup>40</sup> He is no different from the other young white businessmen who inhabit the cityplace, and therefore he does not register as an individual, his identity is negated. It is only when Bateman mixes with those who purport to belong to a subculture that he becomes visible:

...the crowd has changed – it’s now filled more with punk rockers, blacks, fewer Wall Street guys...and the music has changed...it’s some black guy rapping...I sidle up to a couple of hardbody rich girls...one of these girls sneers and says “Go back to Wall Street,” and the other one with the nose ring says, “Fucking Yuppie.” And they say this even though my suit looks black in the darkness of the club and my tie – paisley, Armani, silk – is loosened. (*Psycho*, 190)

Issues of performance, as discussed earlier, become apparent once again here. It appears that as with the rich kids in *Girls, Visions and Everything* who threaten to beat up Lila, the girls that Bateman sidles up to are merely masquerading as punks. As with the adoption of loft living and so forth, this again can be seen as the hijacking of

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<sup>40</sup> Fay Weldon, email from the author, 4 Aug. 2002.

elements of a subculture by the dominant classes. Nevertheless, the rich girls see themselves as breaking with convention and in turn shun Bateman on account of his yuppie appearance. This is perhaps one of the few instances in the novel when Bateman's presence warrants any form of reaction within the public or semi public sphere. Earlier in the novel, Bateman describes his evening at a club called Tunnel, which is reminiscent of Club Mission on the Bowery. Here the divide between rich and poor is clear. Even on the street, ropes divide the tuxedoed gentlemen waiting to make use of their VIP passes and the 'bum' who stands begging with a Styrofoam cup (*Psycho*, 50). When Bateman unwittingly mixes with punks, blacks and Rastas, there is a distinct tension. Ironically, Bateman already feels that he can fit in, due to the fact that his suit is black and his tie is paisley (which we presume he feels gives him an automatic allegiance with goths and hippies). After being rejected by the rich 'hardbodies', he attempts to follow their lead by also adopting the actions and language of those around him: "I stick out my hand at a crooked angle, trying to mimic a rapper. "Hey," I say. "I'm fresh. The freshest. y'know...like uh, def..." (*Psycho* 191). He claims the language as his own and essentially murders it.

Bateman can be seen as an embodiment of the "crawling invasion of gentrification," (*GVE*, 19) which Lila fears in *Girls, Visions and Everything*. His acquisition of black urban dialect and mannerisms alert us to the wider cultural ramifications of his behaviour throughout the novel. A press release from the DSLR or Department of Space and Land Reclamation,<sup>41</sup> outlines the manner in which gentrification is as much about intellectual landscapes as it is about the acquisition of land:

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<sup>41</sup> The DSLR (Department of Space and Land Reclamation) is an activist campaign formed in Chicago in April 2001 to combat gentrification.

...the entertainment industry has quickly moved in and absorbed every point of radical culture, whether it is raves, Punk, skateboarding or Hip-Hop, and rapidly dismantled it into saleable pieces. Selling out culture is just another example of the manner in which the creative products of culture are quickly alienated and sold back to their producers.<sup>42</sup>

Rap, which grew out of the Jamaican tradition of 'toasting' began to flourish in New York in the 1970's. The language of rap became a manner of depicting the harsh realities of the black urban ghetto. The gap between the black ghetto and white capitalist Bateman is drastically wider than that of the 'White Negro' and hipster discussed in earlier chapters. The white hipster's adoption of jazz and bop-talk certainly led ultimately to its commodification. Nevertheless, the hipster had some form of proximity or a will to understand black urban communities from which these forms emanated. Arguably, it was not the hipster's intention for jazz to become commodified. Bateman, conversely, who is geographically, economically and culturally separated from the ghetto, is only concerned with image. He 'absorbs' this language momentarily only because it is 'fashionable' in these particular surroundings. The language of rap becomes no more than another of Bateman's accessories – carefully selected to make himself appear more desirable to those around him. He of course fails miserably, Ellis making the heavily ironic reproduction of black ghetto-speak by a wealthy white capitalist a point of ridicule. Bateman is portrayed as simultaneously absurd and murderous.

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<sup>42</sup> "DSLR: Reclaiming the Manipulative City," *DSLR*, Jul. 2001, New York, 21 May 2004 <[http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dslrPressPages/dslrPress\\_CI.html](http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dslrPressPages/dslrPress_CI.html)>.

### **“Digit, pudding, clunk...”: The Consumption of Counterculture**

Is Bateman aware how ridiculous he appears? His shocking taste is epitomised by his record collection. Apart from finding a profound depth to Phil Collins’ lyrics, Bateman informs us “I had to stop at Tower Records on the Upper West Side and buy ninety dollars worth of rap CDs but, as expected, I’m at a loss: niggerish voices uttering ugly words like *digit*, *pudding* and *clunk*” (*Psycho*, 246). Bateman *having* to buy a pile of CDs which he *expects* not to like is utterly ludicrous. As in the nightclub, Ellis offers us a caricature of a wealthy nerd who is desperate to be thought of as cool. The rap CDs are an attempt to acquire ‘coolness’ via a series of selective purchases. He does not understand or identify with the “ugly words” of rap, yet believes that having these titles in his collection will gain him a certain degree of street cred. Ironically, the fact the CDs have found their way into the collection of a Wall St. broker suggests that the recording artists themselves are becoming mainstream, and that their own sub-cultural cool is waning. The materialist Bateman can be seen as a carrier of pollution. In buying up the rap albums he simultaneously poisons their appeal.

Consequently, Bateman is representative of a wider destruction instigated by the broker class. On a much grander scale, Lila’s neighbourhood in *Girls, Visions and Everything* is subject to a similar process. The buildings are bought up by real estate brokers, gutted and resold or rented out at a substantial profit. On the Lower East Side, graffiti such as “Die Yuppie Scum” and “Mug a Yuppie” became popular in the nineteen eighties as residents sensed a threat to their community. In *Selling the Lower East Side*, Reymers, Webb and Mele reveal that “in the early 1980s, key activists and organizations proposed a new legislative means to combat the negative aspects of urban restructuring — keeping *in rem* (city-owned) property from ever entering the

profit-oriented private housing market.”<sup>43</sup> Residents and activists were aware that once city owned property became privately owned, real estate brokers would bring a wrecking ball to their community. The ‘bohemian’ lifestyle, which many of the residents were living on the Lower East Side, would be bought up along with the buildings themselves. What Elizabeth Wilson refers to as “bohemia for the masses”<sup>44</sup> would then become the selling point of yuppie apartments once inhabited by artists or squatters. The affluent would buy into what was presented to them as an ‘authentic’ bohemian lifestyle. Wilson holds up British politician Peter Mandelson’s move to the Portobello Road in London as a key example. He believed his relocation “showed what a bohemian radical soul he was, a natural social rebel...not a boring old leftie who can’t have a good time.”<sup>45</sup> However, Wilson points out the “peeling stucco” of this once bohemian area has been replaced by “dazzling white and cream,” the bohemians themselves by “metropolitan media glitterati.”<sup>46</sup> This is essentially the case with the Lower East Side: as bohemia is glamorised as a saleable product, it is simultaneously cannibalised. The wealthy retain the desirable aspects of the bohemian lifestyle that which will denote them as being, like Mandelson, a ‘natural social rebel’ and discard the rest. What remains is a commodified version of bohemia, comparable to one of Bateman’s corpses: exploited, disfigured and virtually unrecognisable.

### **“Lets Beat up the Poor!”<sup>47</sup>**

In “A Walk on the Wild Side: Urban Ethnography Meets the Flâneur” Chris Jenks and Tiago Neves state that:

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<sup>43</sup> Kurt Reymers, Daniel Webb and Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 364.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 220.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 234.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, *Bohemians* 234.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Lets Beat Up the Poor!” *The Parisian Prowler* 121-3



Born of the urban complex, the locus of modernity, the flâneur is its product and an innovative attempt at the appropriation and representation of the city...The flâneur introduces a phenomenology of the urban built around the issues of fragmentation of experience and commodification.<sup>48</sup>

‘Appropriation’ and ‘commodification’ are key terms when examining Patrick Bateman’s urban wandering. If we compare the following two passages, it appears that Bateman has a greater kinship with the Baudelarean flâneur than any of the protagonists examined in earlier chapters.

As I was about to enter a tavern, a beggar held out his hat, with one of those unforgettable looks that would topple thrones....Immediately, I pounced on my beggar. With a single punch I shut one eye, which became, in a second, as big as a ball. I broke one of my nails smashing two of his teeth, and since I didn’t feel strong enough to beat up the old man quickly, having been born fragile and not well trained in boxing, with one hand I grabbed him by the collar of his outfit, and I gripped his throat with the other, and I began vigorously to bounce his head against a wall. I should admit that beforehand I had examined the surroundings with a glance, and I had ascertained that in that deserted suburb, for a long enough time, I was beyond the reach of any policeman.<sup>49</sup>

“Assommons les Pauvres!” or “Let’s Beat up the Poor,” features as the penultimate prose poem in Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris. Petits Poèmes en prose* (1869).

Edward K. Kaplan, editor of the American translation, *The Parisian Prowler* (1989)

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<sup>48</sup> Chris Jenks, Tiago Neves, “A Walk on the Wild Side: Urban Ethnography Meets the Flâneur,” *Cultural Values* 4.1 (2000): 1.

<sup>49</sup> Baudelaire, “Let’s Beat Up the Poor!,” 122.

comments in his introduction that the poem “epitomises the gallows humour of those “immoral” tales which claim that another person’s pain is a trivial price to pay for a theoretical truth.”<sup>50</sup> With regards to *American Psycho*, it shares startling similarities with a chapter entitled “Tuesday,” where Bateman mutilates a homeless man. Both feature a prowler, an individual wandering with a casual intent to harm, both are calculated attacks to the extent that the prowler ascertains that no one is watching, and both describe the motiveless victimization of a vagrant. The two attackers use different methods: the Baudelairean wanderer attacks with his fists and the injuries inflicted are far less severe, whilst Bateman is armed with “a long thin knife with a serrated edge” which he vindictively uses to carve up the vagrant’s face and eyes. Yet the attackers themselves share a number of characteristics. Both are affluent individuals. In a moment of high camp, Baudelaire’s wanderer laments breaking one of his nails, reminiscent of Bateman’s own fussiness when it comes to his appearance. The protagonist’s comments regarding being “born fragile” and “not well trained in boxing” not only characterise him as being rather effete, but also cause us to suspect that his ‘refinement’ is a product of his wealthy background. We immediately classify the protagonist as a member of the upper classes, a professional or even part of the aristocracy. In comparison with the protagonist in “Let’s Beat Up the Poor!” Patrick Bateman is rather less effete to the extent that he *does* occasionally box (although boxing was traditionally an aristocratic sport) and is obsessed with physical strength and fitness, the eighties yuppie obsession with the ‘hardbody’.

Consequently, in both “Let’s Beat Up the Poor!” and *American Psycho* we encounter two wealthy men idly wandering the streets of a major city. In “Let’s Beat Up the Poor!” the protagonist informs us that before venturing out into the streets of

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<sup>50</sup> Edward K. Kaplan, introduction, *The Parisian Prowler* xx.

Paris, "For two weeks I had shut myself up in my room. and I had surrounded myself with the books fashionable at the time...then I went out quite thirsty. For a passionate craving for shoddy books begets a proportional need for the open air and refreshments."<sup>51</sup> It is clear that the protagonist does not need to work. he is a man of leisure. He can choose to shut himself up in a room for two weeks without worrying about his job, or paying his bills. Bateman is very similar in the sense that his father owns a substantial amount of the company he works for, Pierce & Pierce. His 'job' is a mere pastime, something to occupy his mind. He spends most of his time in restaurants or bars: "Arcadia", "Dorsia", "Harry's Bar," and takes trips to the Hamptons whenever he pleases. As with the protagonist in "Let's Beat Up the Poor!", he has an unlimited amount of leisure time and equally philistine tastes. Filling this leisure time is perhaps part of the problem for both protagonists. Having exhausted the pleasure of indulging in life's luxuries, they break from the shelter of their lavish apartments and begin wandering in the city in search of more unconventional, taboo forms of entertainment: violence, drugs and prostitutes. In order to do this they must enter and explore the city's minatorial spaces. This is indeed what Bateman does.

**"I've spent months prowling this area...": The Meatpacking District**

I tell the chauffeur to head over to the meat-packing district just west of Nell's. near the bistro Florent, to look for prostitutes and after heavily scanning the area twice – actually. I've spent months prowling this area for the appropriate babe – find her on the corner of Washington and Thirteenth. She's blond and slim and young, trashy but not an escort bimbo, and most important. she's *white*, which is a rarity in these parts. She's wearing tight cut off shorts, a white T-shirt

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<sup>51</sup> Baudelaire, "Let's Beat Up the Poor!," 121.

and a cheap leather jacket and except for a bruise over her left knee her skin is pale all over, including the face, though her thickly lipsticked mouth is done up in pink. Behind her, in four-foot-tall red block letters painted on the side of an abandoned brick warehouse, is the word M E A T and the way the letters are spaced awakens something in me and above the building like a backdrop is a moonless sky, which earlier, in the afternoon, was hung with clouds but tonight isn't.

(*Psycho*, 161)

Bateman's entry into the meat-packing district is revealing. In the mid 1980s, this area was famed for its "hookers, transsexuals and chains-and-studs bikers congregating under the old elevated ironworks of the decaying West Side Highway."<sup>52</sup> At the beginning of the twenty first century, the gentrification of this downtown district is depicted most famously in the television series *Sex and the City*. Samantha Jones relocates to a loft conversion apartment here, after growing tired of the wealthy yet stuffy Upper East Side.

Bateman could in certain respects be seen as spearheading the gentrification process here. In the nineteen eighties it would be highly unlikely that Bateman would be able to walk in this area, dressed in his Ermenegildo Zegna suit, without being victimized. Gangs would instantly recognize him as a wealthy outsider, and he would almost certainly be mugged if not killed. Nevertheless, his wealth gives him the power to explore (and take from) this minatorial space untouched. He hires a limousine and chauffeur and cruises the streets in search of prostitutes. As discussed in reference to Wojnarowicz in the previous chapter, the car, in this case a limousine, creates a private space for Bateman in which his influence can be maintained. The secluded

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<sup>52</sup> David Wickers, "New New York," *The Sunday Times* 5 May. 2002, sec. Travel: 1-2.

environment of the limo is an expensive substitute for walking. He is in a position of surveillance within the street, yet he is apart (physically and metaphorically) from the crowd itself. Consequently, he can view the public space from the car window, without having to confront the threatening characters that inhabit this space. Bateman is almost completely protected from the outside world by the hard shell of the bulletproofed limousine. Behind the one-way glass of his passenger window he is, as is the Baudelairean flâneur, “isolated from those he observes.”<sup>53</sup> Yet unlike the Baudelairean flâneur, he is, literally rather than metaphorically, invisible to the crowd. This in turn offers Bateman the opportunity to stare at pedestrians as much as he desires. The pedestrians have no awareness that he is observing them; when they look into the car all they are met with is their own reflection in the smoked glass. They have an *idea* that someone is behind the glass, yet they cannot possibly have any idea who that person is, or indeed whether he or she is looking directly at them.

The idea of being behind one-way glass in its own right eliminates the mutuality of walking in the cityplace. In the previous two chapters we examined how in the crowd each individual's presence on the street can be seen as a kind of performance. In most instances at street level the individual offers him or herself to the crowd by putting him or herself on ‘display’. In recompense for this ‘display’ the individual is in turn given the opportunity to witness others ‘displaying’ themselves. By placing himself in a limousine Bateman reneges on this unspoken agreement. He draws an obvious (sexual) pleasure from observing the crowd, especially the scantily dressed prostitutes plying their trade on street corners: “I’ve spent months prowling this area for the appropriate babe” (*Psycho*, 161). His position is similar to that of the billionaire asset manager Eric Packer in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. The purpose for

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<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* 94–5.

Packer's journey through New York in a limousine is to travel to the barbershop for a haircut. Both protagonists are in similar positions to the degree that they are both rich men looking for sensory experience and a connection with the outside world. For Bateman, the outside world becomes 'eye candy', from which he takes what he pleases.

Bateman captures perfectly what Zygmunt Bauman describes as the "art of the flâneur...seeing without being caught looking."<sup>54</sup> In doing so Bateman can also be seen as fitting neatly into the role of the classic photographic observer. The scene outside of the limousine is described with great care and accuracy. His subject almost appears delicately pre-arranged in its theatricality. The sky provides a "backdrop" which in the afternoon was "hung with clouds". It now appears that these 'props' have been removed in favour of a "moonless sky". The painted "MEAT" sign also appears to have been carefully positioned almost as a caption for the photograph itself, describing how Bateman envisages the prostitute standing below it. He pays great attention to the girl herself, focusing in on minor details such as a "bruise over her left knee" or her "thickly lipsticked mouth" (*Psycho*, 161).

Jenks and Neves discuss the manner in which the act of looking can be seen as a "visual violation". They pose the question: "why is visual violation ethically condemnable whereas it is usually agreed that the best answers are the ones obtained without asking questions?"<sup>55</sup> Bateman's auto-flânerie in the Meatpacking district can certainly be described as "visual violation". He appropriates the image of the prostitute in her squalid surroundings for his own erotic pleasure. Again, as in Tunnel, Bateman can be by no means thought of as an urban ethnographer. He does not wish to understand or discuss the mutual differences between his own world and that of the

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<sup>54</sup> Bauman, "Desert Spectacular," *The Flâneur* 141.

<sup>55</sup> Jenks and Neves, "A Walk on the Wild Side," 5-6.

prostitute. He merely wishes to parasitically feed off the impoverished Meatpacking District and then withdraw back to the safety of his apartment.

However, unlike the protagonists discussed in previous chapters, Bateman indulges further than mere 'visual violation'. He is what Benjamin describes as a 'collector,'<sup>56</sup> and therefore must partake in 'physical violation'. After making his selection, Bateman propositions Christie, the girl standing under the painted "MEAT" sign, by rolling down his electric window and asking her to come back to his apartment. Bateman's crawling of the Meatpacking district raises a number of issues with regard to desire, space and power in the cityplace. We learn that *anything* can be bought. Explicitly, we are shown girls being purchased like "MEAT", yet implicitly we are shown how money can buy trust (Christie's initial trust of Bateman), silence (the unnamed, unseen chauffeur never questions or informs on him) and perhaps most relevant to this thesis, invisibility and the freedom to navigate the most threatening of geographies.

### The Collector

Bateman returns to his apartment with the blonde prostitute, a trophy from his late night hunt. He appears fascinated with the manufacture and recording of spectacle. In "Parodied to death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*," Ruth Helyer comments:

When he first takes her home he bathes her in expensive products, dresses her in designer clothes, and feeds her exclusive chocolates and wine in a travesty of the Pygmalion fantasy (one might point to *Pretty Woman* as a recent example of such fantasy) that a rich, handsome, and

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<sup>56</sup> Frisby states that Benjamin saw the "flâneur optical, [the] collector tactile." David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity in the work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1985) 228.

kind man will come along and save a young, pretty prostitute from the streets.<sup>57</sup>

Again Bateman's actions are seen as having a theatrical quality. Helyer proposes that it is as if Patrick is "making his own remake of a film".<sup>58</sup> Yet Bateman seems far more interested in creating stills rather than cinematic footage: this is made apparent by his careful positioning of bodies during sex and his careful arrangement of body *parts* after a murder. As touched upon earlier, he makes this explicit after disfiguring the tramp: "I linger at the scene amused by the tableau" (*Psycho*, 126). Bateman telephones an agency to request a high-class prostitute, whilst Christie bathes. When Sabrina arrives, the ménage à trois which ensues can almost be envisaged as a pornographic photo-shoot taking place in front of an invisible photographer: "Christie is on all fours, facing the headboard, her ass raised high in the air...and I'm straddling her back...[I] lie on my back positioning Sabrina's face over my stiff, huge cock...I push Sabrina off my cock and lay her on her back" (*Psycho*, 168). Bateman is constantly repositioning the girls, forcing them into a series of erotic poses. Each pose appears to be held momentarily for the hypothetical click of the shutter, before moving on to the next.

Bateman takes a similar approach to the mutilation of his victims. In regards to the fate of Christie, Bateman informs us:

My apartment reeks of rotten fruit, though actually the smell is caused by what I scooped out of Christie's head and poured into a Marco glass bowl that sits on the counter near the entranceway. The head itself lies covered with brain pulp, hollow and eyeless, in the corner of the living

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<sup>57</sup> Ruth Helyer, "Parodied to death: The Postmodern Gothic of *American Psycho*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.3 (Fall 2000): 743-4.

<sup>58</sup> Helyer 744.



room beneath the piano and I plan to use it as a jack-o'-lantern on Halloween. (*Psycho* 300-1)

Bateman generates a grotesque spectacle, heavily disfiguring the severed head, and putting the contents into a designer glass bowl, as casually as though it were fruit. Again, this can be seen as another tableau offered to us by Bateman, a perversely twisted take on a still life. However, Bateman is more than a collector of images. Earlier in the novel Bateman informs us: "When I see a pretty girl walk down the street I think two things. One part of me wants to take her out and talk to her and be real nice and sweet and treat her right [while the other part wonders] what her head would look like on a stick" (*Psycho*, 92). Bateman does not only participate in 'visual appropriation'; unlike earlier protagonists he partakes in physical appropriation from the street. His desire to take a head as a trophy is reminiscent of tsansa or head shrinking. This in turn can be compared to a form of 'big game hunt', although it is markedly more violent than the hipster's expeditions into the Harlem 'jungle'.

The idea that Bateman wants to take a passing stranger's head and put it on a stick correlates with the manner in which he puts Christie's brains in a glass bowl or intends to use her head as a jack-o-lantern. Living bodies are taken from the public space into the private. He then murders and mutilates to the extent that they become ornamental. Bateman's creations border on being a horrific art form.

Referring back to Allen Ginsberg's "Mugging," it is clear that what the flâneur takes visually from the streets can become a commodity. The flâneur is parasitic to the extent that those which inspire his work rarely benefit economically for their role in the creative process. Bateman's murders are the ultimate expression of the flâneur's parasitic nature. Not only does he take a stranger's image and distort it, he takes their body and literally feeds off it, disfiguring it beyond recognition for his own aesthetic

pleasure. His actions are an extension of his corporate role in “mergers and acquisitions” (*Psycho*, 197), stripping his victims of their physical assets. Where Bateman differs from the flâneur is that by killing, he shuts down the commodity circuit. He *literally* uses up the commodity, yet it is clear that he himself attaches some form of value to his trophies or signs of acquisition. For example, Bateman reveals: “In my locker in the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I’ve attacked in the past week. Two are washed off, one isn’t. There’s a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermes tied around my favourite...” (*Psycho*, 370). The vaginas are listed as though they are collector’s items. Somewhat ironically, the Hermes ribbon which is attached to Bateman’s favourite appears to reflect his craving that such items could be purchased at the luxury leatherwear store.

“Nobody Cares....”<sup>59</sup>

The fact that these items are casually scattered in Bateman’s locker and in his apartment raise certain questions as to the city’s concern over his actions. Fay Weldon comments in her article “An Honest American Psycho”, even the most gruesome acts are met with nonchalance:

Nobody cares. Slaughtered bodies lie undiscovered. The city has fallen apart. Nobody takes much notice. The police have other things to do. Those who are killed don’t rate – they are powerless, the poor, the wretched, the sick in the mind, the sellers of flesh for money: their own and other people’s. The tides of the city wash over them, erase their traces.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Fay Weldon, “An Honest *American Psycho*,” *The Guardian* 25 Apr. 1991: 21.

<sup>60</sup> Fay Weldon, “An Honest *American Psycho*,” 21.

Is it that “nobody cares” in general, or that nobody cares about Bateman’s actions alone? Weldon adopts the first of these two arguments, focusing upon the blasé attitude of the city dwellers. She argues that it is not that Bateman is simply invisible, it is just that those around him don’t care – they are far too wrapped up in their own existence to take notice of anyone else’s. In this environment Bateman is given *carte blanche*; he can go where he pleases and say or do anything he pleases without arousing any form of suspicion. Yet, in turn, Weldon argues that this is a symptom of his “ultimate *powerlessness* in the cityplace”: Yes, Bateman can do anything he pleases, yet no matter what he says or does or who he murders “he can’t affect the city.”<sup>61</sup>

Weldon’s observations are correct, to the extent that in *American Psycho* the inhabitants of New York City are portrayed as having a distinctly blasé attitude, which in turn gives Bateman the freedom to do what he desires. However, the ramifications of this argument need to be explored in greater depth. The locus of this argument is, as Simmel refers to it, ‘money exchange’: Simmel states:

The large cities, the main seats of the money exchange, bring the purchasability of things to the fore much more impressively than do smaller localities. That is why cities are also the genuine locale of the blasé attitude. In the blasé attitude the concentration of men and things stimulate the nervous system of the individual to its highest achievement so that it attains its peak. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditioning factors this achievement is transformed into its opposite and appears in the peculiar adjustment of the blasé attitude. In this phenomenon the nerves find in the refusal to

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<sup>61</sup> Fay Weldon, email from the author, 4 Aug. 2002.

react to their stimulation the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life. The self-preservation of certain personalities is bought at the price of devaluating the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidably drags one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness.<sup>62</sup>

The 'blasé attitude' which Simmel describes could refer directly to the inhabitants of New York City, as described by Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho*. Simmel proposes that there is an undeniable link between "the purchasability of things" and "blasé attitude" of those who inhabit the cityspace. In urban society everything has a value, and everyone knows the value of everything. When Bateman meets others he assesses them by their garments and accessories: "Price is wearing a six button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rosetti.... Courtney opens the door and she is wearing a Krizia cream silk blouse, a Krizia rust tweed skirt and silk-satin d'Orsay pumps by Manolo Blahnik" (*Psycho*, 4, 8). Bateman's awareness of designer labels (and their price) allows him to immediately judge how much the individual is *worth*. The value of the individual is not judged by personality or even intellect but by whether the cost of their garments are comparable to Bateman's own. If they have spent less money on their outfit, they are worthless and are met with disgust; if they have spent a similar amount, they are met with nonchalance yet considered equal; if they have spent more, they must face Bateman's psychotic envy. There are no positive emotions here. Money, as Simmel states, "with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific

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<sup>62</sup> Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *Simmel on Culture*, eds. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997) 179.

value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constant moving stream of money. All things lie on the same level and differ only in the size of the area which they cover.”<sup>63</sup> Bateman does not even comment upon whether the clothes themselves are aesthetically pleasing: “all qualitative differences of things are expressed in terms of ‘how much?’”<sup>64</sup>

### The “crawling invasion of gentrification”

The quotation from Simmel brings us back to what Schulman describes as the “crawling invasion of gentrification” (*GVE*, 19). As an individual, Bateman is trapped within a perpetual cycle of acquire, possess, distort, destroy; a cycle similar to gentrification itself. In “Alternative Space,” Rosalind Deutsch states:

...because artists often share city spaces with the underhoused, they have been positioned as both perpetrators and victims in the processes of displacement and urban planning. They have come to be seen as a pivotal group, easing the return of the middle class to city centres. Ironically, however, artists themselves are often displaced by the same wealthy professionals - their clientele - who have followed them into now chic neighborhoods.<sup>65</sup>

This specific process is exemplified by the transformation of the Bowery, depicted at the beginning of this chapter. As outlined earlier, the area experienced an influx of artists in the middle of the twentieth century. If Deutsch’s proposal is to be believed, this movement spearheaded the gradual gentrification process in this area which is ongoing today. Is William Burroughs’ so called “old bunker” somehow the inspiration for the ‘designer’ apartments which are to encroach on the Liz Christy Garden?

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<sup>63</sup> Simmel 178.

<sup>64</sup> Simmel 178.

<sup>65</sup> Deutsch, qtd. in “DSLR: Reclaiming the Manipulative City,”  
<[http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dslrPressPages/dslrPress\\_CL.html](http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dslrPressPages/dslrPress_CL.html) .

Futuransky herself cites the art galleries as the very root of the problem: "Once she got past all of those art galleries, it was still a nice block" (*GVE*, 19). If the artist can be seen as a 'perpetrator' in the process of gentrification, then the flâneur cannot escape judgement. Does James Baldwin's *Another Country* subtly inspire young readers to relocate to Harlem in later life? Did Allen Ginsberg's wanderings unintentionally stimulate white middle-class tourism and the eventual construction of clubs such as Mission on the Lower East Side? The wider ramifications of flânerie in relation to the spread of gentrification will be discussed in the next concluding chapter.

With specific regards to *Girls Visions and Everything* and *American Psycho*, the characters of Lila Futuransky and Patrick Bateman represent two dimensions of the flâneur. Futuransky is an insider, a part of the community, and therefore has close allegiances to those she describes. Her gaze is nostalgic and sympathetic. Conversely, Bateman has no allegiances with the street. For Bateman, those closest to the street are worthless; before mutilating the vagrant he asks, "do you know what a fucking loser you are?" (*Psycho*, 126). Bateman is a capitalist adventurer, driven by the desire to consume, making no attempt to reflect on his actions. He collects mementoes from the street: that which cannot be bought is torn away by force. Bateman is by no means the pared down epitome of each and every New York flâneur, yet he does represent certain rapacious elements of the flâneur's character, albeit to the extreme.

Alternatively, Futuransky represents empathetic aspects of the flâneur's nature, yet again in an extreme form, given her proximity to her subject. Generally, the New York flâneur flips between these two extremes. For example, as discussed in chapter two, Kerouac periodically shows what appears to be a genuine compassion for the plight of black communities, yet he is far more removed than the likes of Futuransky.

Simultaneously, Kerouac identifies and seizes opportunities to 'get his kicks' in the ghetto, although his desires are barely comparable to Bateman's.

This chapter also underlines the precarious position in which the flâneur is placed when documenting vulnerable poor communities. In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Lila points towards artists as the avant-garde of gentrification. In terms of bohemian-artistic forms of social transgression, it is possible that the flâneur is somewhat more to blame. The flâneur's desire is to wander, to discover and document unexplored territory within the cityplace. His or her mobility leads to the unearthing of enclaves previously unexcavated by bohemia; the flâneur is then followed by the artist, who is in time, as Lila rightly points out, followed by the middle class art collector. In his or her movements, the flâneur clearly has no intention of forming the avant-garde of gentrification. After all, gentrification inevitably displaces vulnerable bohemian communities alongside the poor. Yet as areas such as the Lower East Side become romanticized they also develop the potential to become a commodity. To a certain extent, it is arguable that even a work such as *Girls, Visions and Everything* accelerates rather than slows the gentrification process, given the manner in which Schulman depicts the qualities of the existing tightly knit community. This in turn encourages a further wave of potential property buyers to the neighbourhood.

Should the flâneur be condemned for spearheading the charge of gentrification? This depends greatly on which flâneur we are referring to. In converting experience into art the flâneur cannot avoid exoticizing the cityplace. The flâneur's gaze functions similarly to the photographer's lens in that it selects specific images. In the process of selecting images of urban existence, other aspects of the city are naturally omitted. Immediately the truth recedes behind layers of romanticisation. The banal is filtered out or converted into the picturesque, whilst that which is

captivating about life in the city or specific neighbourhoods is amplified. Bateman offers us an extreme representation of the flâneur's appropriation and aestheticization. The manner in which he cannibalises and consumes at whim is an exaggeration of certain hedonistic drives which form part of the flâneur's character. He is an extreme, parasitic version of the flâneur open to exploiting the vulnerable for his own personal gain. If we look to Bateman, we can perhaps understand how the flâneur can be thought of as a carrier of gentrification. Yet with Futuransky, we encounter a flâneur with very different intentions. Unlike Bateman, her aim is not to disfigure communities, but preserve them. She wishes to capture a specific moment in the cityplace, to mythologise her contemporaries before corporate predators such as Bateman remove them. The rapacious nature of capitalism is highlighted by the manner in which bohemia is exploited as a method of access into potentially profitable urban enclaves, and then devoured once real estate prices begin to soar.



## Conclusion

Both Baudelaire and Benjamin were fascinated by the phantasmagoria of nineteenth century Paris: the manner in which the city produced desirable images, a blend of the real and the illusory. The flâneur navigated his way through dreamlike urban worlds, scrutinising the ‘apparitions’ which appeared to him from the crowd. In terms of the dialectical image, the city held the power to both elucidate and distort.

With regards to twentieth century New York, the flâneur must also navigate a similar “web of seduction,”<sup>1</sup> where he or she encounters distorted identities, doppelgangers, layers of illusion and alternate realities. In terms of light alone, the flâneur witnesses how the nocturnal neon of Times Square illuminates the city’s excluded ‘others’ as a ghastly demimonde. Times Square itself becomes an entry point into the criminal underworld for wanderers such as the Beats: from cafeterias such as Bickford’s, the nightly unveiling of the ‘shadow city’ can be observed.

The New York flâneur’s fascination with crepuscule again relates directly to nineteenth century Paris. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin draws attention to Delvau’s comments on “noctambulism,” particularly the fact that the flâneur “does not have the right to sleep.”<sup>2</sup> In Manhattan, the flâneur may become a ‘noctambulist’ through choice or destitution. The flâneurs examined in this thesis have varying degrees of contact with the ‘shadow city’. O’Hara predominantly witnesses daytime New York in the vicinity of his workplace; Ginsberg and Lila chronicle walking in their *own* neighbourhoods at night; Kerouac, Vivaldo and Bateman use the cover of

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard’s “web of seduction,” with references to shadowing, the double and potential threat, seems somewhat appropriate when applied to New York’s own production of a phantasmagoria: “To shadow another is to give him, in fact, a double life, a parallel existence. Any commonplace existence can be transfigured (without one’s knowledge), any exceptional existence can be made commonplace. It is this effect of doubling that makes the object surreal in its banality and weaves around it the strange (eventually dangerous?) web of seduction.” Jean Baudrillard, *Please Follow Me* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988) 79.

<sup>2</sup> Delvau qtd. in Benjamin, *Arcades* 429.

nightfall to cross into other neighbourhoods to fuel their desires. whilst Huncke and Wojnarowicz have no choice but to remain on the street at night and develop an intimate knowledge of the nocturnal city.

The flâneur's 'noctambulism' corresponds directly with a deeper fascination regarding display and concealment. At night, issues of display and concealment are intensely exaggerated. Identity is both cloaked by the shadows and exposed, to varying degrees, by the city's array of lights. The intensity of both light and shadow is amplified by Manhattan's deep canyon like streets and aggressive illuminations. In this terrain, the pedestrian can descend into the criminal darkness or bathe in the spotlight of the 'Great White Way'.

By day, the literary flâneur reveals a continued, if not more subtle, interplay of display and concealment of identity within the New York cityplace. As the shadows recede, identities continue to be revealed and masked by varying degrees of performance. With regards to race, Kerouac and Vivaldo appropriate aspects of black identity in a bid to integrate and forge allegiances with African American communities, whilst emphasising their 'otherness' in relation to white mainstream society. Conversely, New York's black community has no choice but to be excluded on account of race. The performance of white identity, or 'passing', is only viable for those with lighter skin. When venturing downtown, Rufus cannot mask the colour of his skin, and on account of this, his visible racial outsidership restricts his freedom.

All of the wanderers examined in this thesis, except perhaps with the exception of Bateman, are caught up in the display and concealment of sexuality. As Whitman disguises nineteenth century acts of cruising in his "Calamus" poems, the act of flânerie and the gay cruise blur in the work of O'Hara and Ginsberg. The flâneur's drift becomes a loosely veiled hunt for the desirable homoerotic image. As

hustlers, Huncke and Wojnarowicz's display and concealment of sexuality is linked directly to their criminality. They must reveal their role as hustlers to potential 'johns', yet take on the guise of respectability when confronted with the authorities. Kerouac and Vivaldo are both involved in homosexual activity, yet conceal their sexuality via acts of aggression against the gay community. Ironically, Lila chooses to telegraph her homosexuality by performing a stylised version of Beat masculinity.

New York's street gangs are identified by their uniform or colours, which in turn grant or restrict access to specific turf. Identity has a similar bearing on the flâneur's movement. The flâneur becomes visible in Manhattan because identity is the access key to the city's micro-communities. How the individual's identity is read in relation to the space which he or she occupies determines whether he or she is an insider or outsider, protected or threatened. The twentieth century New York flâneur reveals that he is not only the watcher in the city, but the watched.

Performance of identity becomes an attempted method of safely navigating Manhattan's minatorial geography. The wanderer adopts a series of 'masks'. For example, Lila believes her performance of butch masculinity will allow her to walk the streets untouched, whilst Huncke hopes that his performance of respectability will deter the police prowler car. Their performances fail as their predators ascertain their concealed identities: Lila is threatened with queer bashing whilst walking, and Huncke is arrested. The predator and prey are exposed as being locked in mutual surveillance, each trying to read the other.

The sense of anxiety within the cityplace is further heightened when threat becomes unreadable. Bateman's identity as a bland businessman offers no indication of the danger he poses. He does not need to rely on performance to conceal his vicious

persona, as the city which he inhabits looks not to its dominant classes as a source of threat, but to its excluded 'others'.

As discussed in chapter one, the flâneur was often depicted as a dandy in nineteenth century works, such as Huart's *Physiologie du Flâneur*.<sup>3</sup> The Parisian dandy flâneur was a decadent, yet predominantly passive character. At the turn of the twentieth century in New York, even the dandy was seen to be developing into a potentially threatening figure. As Sante states, "most Eastmans and Five Pointers were dandies, clean-shaven, manicured, their hair pomaded, who decked out in dress suits for their rackets. They used scent liberally...."<sup>4</sup> It is somewhat unsurprising that the New York flâneur too, in his many varying guises, gained a closer proximity to street violence than his Parisian predecessor. In this thesis, the literary flâneur is considered as both predator and prey. The experience of violent acts relates directly to the crossing of boundaries within the city. Manhattan's complex network of micro-communities dictate a definite sense of place. O'Hara's lunch break walks stay within the vicinity of his workplace at MoMA. Threat is implied by the presence of 'others' on the street, for example the "Negro [who] stands in a doorway with a / toothpick, languorously agitating" (19-22) in "A Step Away From Them." Yet, in the affluent, predominantly white, policed space of 1950s Midtown, there is little threat of violence toward the flâneur.

Conversely, Ginsberg and Lila stay within their neighbourhoods, yet are still the victims of violent acts. Issues of outsidership remain key. Ginsberg is preyed upon due to his physical 'otherness,' his fragility setting him apart in the tough Lower East Side. Lila is also preyed upon on account of her appearance and vulnerability as a woman walking at night, yet her aggressors are outsiders themselves: rich kids

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<sup>3</sup> Huart, *Physiologie du Flâneur* 54, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Sante 219.

playing at being punks who threaten to queer bash her. The rich kids can be aligned with Bateman, their violence being part of the gentrification process, cleansing the city of 'otherness'. Kerouac and Vivaldo also partake in queer bashing, an attempt to defend heterosexual space. Yet, as discussed earlier in relation to identity and sexuality, it is their own 'otherness' as closet homosexuals which they are attempting to conceal.

Moving into 'other' spaces is deemed an act of aggression. As queer bashing occurs as a result of gay encroachment upon 'straight' space, race dictates an even more definite sense of 'place' within Manhattan. Ethnic minorities are pushed to the city's margins, a method of de facto segregation which discourages but does not prevent miscegenation and cultural cross pollination. In 1950s Manhattan the crossing of the implied racial boundaries within the city was a subversive act. Baldwin's *Another Country* considers the manner in which the hipster saw his entry into Harlem as an attempt to sever himself from the white mainstream, by forging allegiances with racial 'outsiders'. Baldwin then reconsiders this act from a black perspective, depicting hipsters similar to Kerouac as invaders. Vivaldo is threatened with violence whilst trawling Harlem for a prostitute on account of his trespassing on black turf. African American Rufus is made to feel equally uncomfortable whilst walking with his white girlfriend in Greenwich Village.

The texts examined in this thesis reveal the tension generated by Manhattan's dense urban environment. Communities are butted up against one another, with no space for buffer zones. Those who are pushed to the city's margins exist at what often appears to be an uncomfortably close proximity, to the extent that queer space and bohemia meld and spill into the ghetto or skid row. Manhattan's criminal and sexual underworlds, along with its bohemias and ghettos, are formed partly as a survival

method to protect and perpetuate a shared identity or lifestyle. Although the city's excluded 'others' are united in their poverty and position in relation to the centre, their diverse reasons for social exclusion (willed, racial, sexual or criminal) pose an obstacle to the forming of allegiances between the disparate groups. For example, there is little correlation between the White Negro's willed social exclusion and the unwilling exclusion of the African American. Whereas Kerouac feels that he has unlimited access to the city's 'other' spaces, on account of his self imposed outsidership, black Harlemites perceive his crossing of racial boundaries as predatory and a threat to their community.

Each of the flâneurs examined in the previous chapters display a predatory nature, to the extent that during their walks they traverse the network of boundaries within the city in order to feed off that which they consider 'exotic'. Their actions are often compared to the big game hunt. However, the true threat to all forms of 'otherness' within the cityplace is gentrification. The growing pace of gentrification is charted implicitly by Huncke, whilst watching the demolition and revitalization of Chelsea in the early 1960s and explicitly by Lila pointing out the influx of art galleries and yuppie flats on the Lower East Side in the 1980s. Minatorial spaces, such as Times Square or 125<sup>th</sup> Street, which were key prowling grounds for the city's outsiders alongside the twentieth century flâneur, have been sanitised and homogenised.

Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* in particular demonstrates the pressure placed upon marginal communities by wealth. Original tenants are evicted to make way for yuppie newcomers. The identity of the community is rapidly eroded and replaced by Main Street, U.S.A. The mercilessly destructive yet bland Bateman is an embodiment of the manner in which the dominant classes pose a direct threat to the

city's excluded others. The 'cleansing' process orchestrated by the Times Square Alliance is parodied and wildly exaggerated by Bateman's murderous acts. Whereas the 'new' Times Square has been redesigned to discourage the bedding down of vagrants, Bateman's corresponding deterrent is to mutilate a vagrant sleeping rough. His assault on 'otherness' extends to culture, marked by his consumption of rap music, the lyrics of which he spits back in an eviscerated form. The dominant classes' absorption, commodification and distortion of marginal identities is further epitomised by the transformation of the bohemian garret into yuppie loft living, or the marketing of Beat style Khakis by GAP.

Those marginal communities which continue to exist in twentieth century Manhattan are seen to be in a precarious position. The flâneur's recognition of the presence of police patrols in *Another Country*, Huncke's "Cruiser on Avenue B," and *Girls, Visions and Everything* suggests that marginal spaces are under regular surveillance. Undercover policing further threatens marginal communities where the authorities take on the guise of the transgressors themselves. The combination of overt and covert surveillance reduces the potential for any form of transgressive activity. The heightened level of police control coincides directly with the spread of gentrification itself. Minatorial spaces are neutralized to make way for the arrival of the 'respectable' classes.

With restricted freedom and heightened costs of living, marginal communities have been pushed to the outer boroughs. Many bohemians relocated from Greenwich Village to Williamsburg in Brooklyn, whilst Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) received a steady stream of black families from Harlem. In his music video for rapper Jay-Z's *99 Problems*,<sup>5</sup> white director Rick Rubin portrays Bed-Stuy in the same manner in

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<sup>5</sup> *99 Problems* dir. Rick Rubins pref. Jay-Z, Def Jam, Apr. 2004.

which Harlem was portrayed by white writers in the twentieth century. Rubin's focus is also lawlessness: black biker gangs, prostitution and drive-by shootings. A surreal glimpse of a witch doctor in full tribal regalia dancing in a subway tunnel is reminiscent of Kerouac's own exoticization of Harlem. However, Bed-Stuy is also currently earmarked for gentrification, an indication of the rapidity at which the city's margins are expanding outwards.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the spread of gentrification also forced Manhattan's excluded 'others' *downwards*. In his introduction to Harry Granick's *Underneath New York*, Robert E. Sullivan states that "there is a city beneath the streets".<sup>6</sup> The book itself was published in 1947 and spoke specifically about the subterranean network of pipes, cables and tunnels which brought power, water and gas to the city. In making this unintentionally prophetic statement, Sullivan clearly had no idea that the subterranean network Granick described *would* eventually become home to a number of large communities. Fifty years after the publication of Granick's book, works such as Marc Singer's film documentary *Dark Days*,<sup>7</sup> Margaret Morton's collection of 60 duotone photographs, *The Tunnel*,<sup>8</sup> along with Jennifer Toth's *The Mole People*<sup>9</sup> proved that there truly was a 'city beneath the streets.'

As with the marginal communities examined previously in this thesis, the underground city is similarly exoticised. Those populating the 'city' are referred to by Manhattanites as C.H.U.D.s (Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers). One underground maintenance worker remarks in an interview with Toth: "They eat dogs,

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<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Sullivan, introduction, *Underneath New York*, by Harry Granick (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1947) 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Dark Days*, dir. Marc Singer, Wide Angle Pictures and Palm Pictures, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Morton, *The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless Of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Toth, *The Mole People* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1993)



I know, and I bet my life they'd eat people."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, due to the lack of authority, the literal underworld is a more anarchic world than that of above ground Manhattan. Whereas the rigid grid system imposes authority and can be carefully policed, street by street, the ravel of tunnels beneath the streets is unpoliceable. This is not only because the tunnels are not fully mapped, but also because, as one police officer admits in *The Mole People*, police radio does not work at such depths.<sup>11</sup>

In Manhattan, even the practice of the 'walk' itself has been commodified: the 'E-walk Complex' offers the opportunity to play the flâneur in a virtual recreation of late nineteenth century New York. Contemporary New York can be viewed in similar safety, via the use of a webcam. The "Earth Cam,"<sup>12</sup> positioned ten feet above the sidewalk on the corner of 47<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, updates once every five to ten seconds, and allows the viewer to pedestrian watch in almost 'real-time'. Alternatively, the viewer can choose to watch the cam's twenty-four hour time lapse, whereby the images are taken at ten minute intervals throughout the night and following day and shown rapidly in succession. The shift from daytime to 'shadow population' which Huncke describes in his work can be viewed daily, at an accelerated pace.

However, the flâneur remains of utmost importance, as unlike the webcam, he or she is able to mediate the sensations and socio-political ramifications of being caught up in Manhattan's "narcotic tobacco haze of capitalism."<sup>13</sup> During the post-war boom, O'Hara is momentarily intoxicated by the world of commodities, yet, for wanderers such as Kerouac, capitalism is recognised as a pollutant. The Beats seek escape at the city's margins among those who are unwillingly excluded on account of

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<sup>10</sup> Toth 74.

<sup>11</sup> Toth 106.

<sup>12</sup> "TGI," *Earthcam*, 10 Jan 2005 <<http://www.earthcam.com/usa/newyork/timesquare/fridays.php>>.

<sup>13</sup> Ginsberg, "Howl," *Selected Poems* 50.

race and/or poverty. Huncke and Wojnarowicz, who chronicle the lives of the city's underclass, present the fallout from the "narcotic tobacco haze" in separate decades. Disease and suffering are common images in their work, as the flâneur too becomes destitute and part of the detritus of capitalism. Schulman and Ellis chart the expansion and intensification of the 'narcotic haze', as it suffocates marginal communities that are unwilling or unable to generate profit.

The flâneur's exploration of these communities reveals the manner in which Manhattan's excluded 'others' are exploited. The state uses the city's 'hidden folk' as justification for its surveillance and policing by depicting the activity which occurs at the city's margins as dangerous, deviant and a potential threat to national security. The flâneur's field notes challenge the assumption that outsidership and malevolence are naturally equated. The minatory images of ethnic, sexual and economic outsiders produced by the state are contradicted by the flâneur's street level reportage of alternate lifestyles. Each of the communities examined in this thesis, as mediated through the eyes of the flâneur, are depicted as besieged by white mainstream culture. 'Otherness' is forced outward into marginal spaces by the dominant classes, only for those spaces to be gradually infiltrated by the dominant classes themselves. The original inhabitants of marginal spaces are united in their persistent refusal to conform. The flâneur demonstrates how perpetual pressure from the centre potentiates communal bonds. Works such as Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Baldwin's "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," celebrate the benevolent community spirit which exists at street level in Manhattan's marginal zones.

It would be foolish to suggest that such zones are free from danger. However, I believe that the manifestation of violent activity within Manhattan's marginal spaces is symptomatic of the unstable social and economic predicament in which these

communities are placed on account of their 'otherness'. The delineation and attempted protection of 'turf' through violence is a reaction on behalf of marginalized communities against the threat of infiltration and potential disintegration. Further transgressive activity, such as the graffiti "Die Yuppie Scum," found on the Lower East Side during gentrification in the late 1980s, could be showcased by the state as the psychotic ranting of a dangerous subculture. A more sympathetic interpretation would read it as a forlorn final attempt to deter an invading broker class and salvage a crumbling community.

Sadly, as depicted most graphically by Schulman, gentrification appears inevitable. The state promotes the process of gentrification as a progressive act: 'no-go' areas within the city become inhabitable through policing and sanitization. However, this is merely a cosmetic overhaul. The streets are being made safer and cleaner for new, wealthy tenants. The outsiders who forged the identity of the neighbourhood are moved on to new marginal spaces and do not get the opportunity to enjoy the safer, cleaner streets.

The new tenants buy into a commodified bohemia. The original character of the neighbourhood is radically altered or lost. Loft living is the performance of an artistic-bohemian existence, yet it lacks the richness of that which it imitates. As Kerouac cannot appropriate certain aspects of black culture, there are similar elements of bohemianism which are out of reach of the dominant classes and cannot be exploited or commodified. The invading professional classes do not experience the same risks as the city's willed bohemian outsiders or unwilled sexual and ethnic 'others'. Despite procuring a 'bohemian' identity they retain the security of being insiders. The streets of post-gentrified neighbourhoods are policed because the new inhabitants and renovated properties are considered of value to society. The bonds

formed between communities of outsiders, which are resultant from living unprotected and unrequired at the margins of society cannot be replicated in post-gentrified neighbourhoods.

There is a further awkwardness to the yuppie appropriation of bohemian identity. For example, Huncke's image is a product of his lifestyle. His appearance as a dishevelled, bohemian down and out is a consequence of his choice not to conform to capitalist ideals, but also the economic hardship which comes with his alternate lifestyle alongside addiction and illness. The yuppie appropriates an artificial image of 'willed outsidership' whilst continuing to conform and contribute to the mainstream in an environment of economic stability.

A true bohemian identity is borne out of a desire for something other than the production of capital. Artistic creativity was a key unifying factor in the pre-gentrified Greenwich Village. The urban professionals that replaced the original community during gentrification had no interest in forming a new artistic avant-garde, but only to replicate the lifestyles of those which they caused to be evicted. Unlike the buildings themselves, the character, creativity and originality of the bohemian-artistic community which ultimately made Greenwich Village desirable as a commodity, could not be prised away from the original tenants. Consequently, the dominant classes appropriated only the empty husk of bohemianism.

Bohemias can never be completely exploited or exterminated: that which cannot be homogenised or commodified can only be pushed outward. The flâneur's field notes certainly draw attention to communities of outsiders, which in turn leads to those communities being earmarked for gentrification. The blame for this phenomenon should not be laid at the feet of the flâneur, rather at those of the opportunistic broker class who exploit the flâneur's exposure of 'otherness' for

financial gain. Rather than simply putting marginal communities in peril, the flâneur should be seen to be advertising the possibility of leading an alternate lifestyle. In doing so, the flâneur draws individuals to the outside and in turn perpetuates outsidership.

The advertising of the act of flânerie itself is subversive. The word 'meanderthal' first occurred in the *Wall Street Journal* in the early 1980s, referring to "a person who walks slowly and aimlessly."<sup>14</sup> This can be interpreted as American capitalism redefining flânerie as a retrograde practice. The term implies that the wanderer is an archaic figure and that his pace forms an obstacle to a fast paced capitalist society. The flâneur is as equal a threat to hegemony as to the communities which he or she surveys. Engaging in the act of flânerie is in itself a firm statement of outsidership, a refusal to conform to the pace and direction of mainstream society. If the crowd is the lifeblood of the New World capitalist city, then the flâneur's dawdling contributes to clogging the city's arteries. It is unsurprising that predators such as Bateman wish to eradicate all forms of outsidership that form dangerous obstacles to capitalist progress. Yet flânerie cannot be exterminated. It is the ultimate act of subversion within the cityplace and all it requires is a change of pace.

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<sup>14</sup> "Meanderthal. A person who walks slowly and aimlessly....Peripatetic male: Meanderthal man." Bob Willett, "Pepper...and Salt," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 1984  
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